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A Deconstructive Reading of Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*

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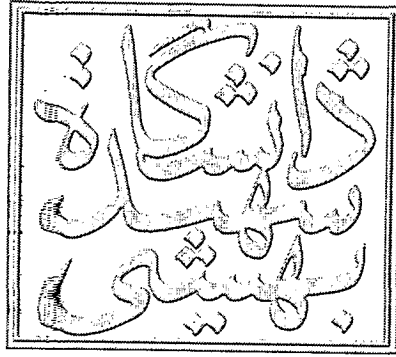
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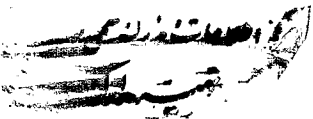
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Abstract

This Thesis includes three chapters respectively named 'differance', 'the individual and the society', and 'communication'. In the first chapter the notions of center and differance are dealt with. The writer talks about how the logocentric culture of the society necessitates the existence of a transcendental signified and how the relationships between a transcendental signified and whatever that follows it are defined. Then the researcher goes on and discusses how definition takes place through the process of differance and that we never reach total signification due to the fact that meaning is always deferred and never achieved. Then the issue of undecidability is elaborated. How closure is never reached and how the nature of statements is never clear-cut in the text.

In the second chapter, some conventions that are also the underlying strategies of the text are revealed, and whether the text has tried to keep up with and observe them or has opted to break away from them. The arbitrariness of the conventions is revealed by putting them across their lack or counterparts in the culture of the overlords. The issue of politics in deconstruction and how political the text is, is dealt with in the same chapter. Deconstruction stresses the role of individuality through plurality; although the text is at times in favor of this outlook, it finally shatters personality and individuality and tries to insert all intelligence in one unified mind.

The last chapter of the body is dedicated to the notion of communication via language. The researcher talks about some aspects of the nature of language and how at times it fails to establish meaningful communication and point out some theories of language from the perspective of some deconstructionalists. The researcher also discusses the phonocentricity of the

logocentric language and how speech is always preferred to writing and then goes on to discuss what Derrida has to say about the hierarchy of speech/ writing and how he tries to dismantle it by calling speech another form of writing.

Introduction

General Background

Arthur C. Clarke, along with Robert A. Heinlein and Isaac Asimov was one of the "Big Three" of science fiction. He was not only a writer of fantasy stories but during the Second World War, he served in the Royal Air Force as a radar specialist. It was there that he worked on Ground Controller Approach (GCA) radar. But his most important contribution to science is the idea of geostationary satellites. He proposed this concept in a paper titled *Extra Terrestrial Relays – Can Rocket Stations Give Worldwide Radio Coverage?* Clarke has also written a number of non-fictional works on space flight including *The Exploration of Space* (1951)

and *The Promise of Space* (1968). Clarke was the first chancellor of the International Space University from 1989 to 2004 and the chancellor of Moratuwa University in Sri Lanka between 1979 and 2002. He was also a distinguished vice-president of H. G. Wells society and was himself influenced by Wells as a science-fiction writer. Clarke has three famous rules:

1. When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.
2. The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.
3. Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. (Wikipedia)

Jacques Derrida is a dominant figure in poststructuralist theory and the founder (if this can be used about Derrida) of Deconstruction. He questioned the certainty and stability of the structuralist worldview and encouraged uncertainty and plurality in all aspects of existence especially language. He was born in 1930 in El-Biar near Algiers, in Algeria which was a French colony. With his family he moved to France on Algerian independence in 1962. He became famous after participating in a conference in the United States in John Hopkins University in 1966 on structuralism. There he presented his famous paper, *Structure, sign and play in the discourse of human sciences*. In 1967 he published his three very important books: *Speech and Phenomena*, *Writing and Difference*, *of Grammatology*. He died in October 2004 in France.

Derrida's works are related to philosophy, humanities, literature and cultural studies. Derrida has been very popular outside the philosophical circle and this has undermined his reputation as a real philosopher, but the same thing happened to people like Nietzsche,

Heidegger and Sartre. No one denies their status nowadays. He has been quoted and referenced a lot in literary studies, especially outside France. His name has come to stand as a symbol of relativism, post modernism, nihilism and skepticism; some have even thought of him as a pretentious charlatan. Derrida was a thinker and a philosopher, but at the same time he cared about political and social issues. He participated in campaigns against the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and racism and in campaigns for the immigrants' and the refugees' rights.

Derrida refuses to call deconstruction, a critical theory or school of criticism; because he doesn't want to adhere to any kind of truth or principle. "Such theories or criticism, he believes, must identify with a body of knowledge that they decree to be true or to contain truth. It is this assertion (that truth or a core of metaphysical ideas can be definitely believed, articulated and supported) that Derrida and deconstruction wish to 'dispute and deconstruct'" (Bressler 1994, 72). It is necessary to mention that most of the biographical account on Derrida was taken from Stocker's book on him and most of Clarke's background was consulted from Wikipedia.

Derrida never made peace with the term deconstruction and its being established as an organized, determined school of thought. He says: "[deconstruction] is a word I have never liked and one whose fortune has disagreeably surprised me" (Royle, 23). Because contrary to what Derrida had repeatedly stated, deconstruction came to work as a method or tool. "Deconstruction was taken to be an ism" (Royle, 23), which is anathema to its very nature and grounds.

Deconstruction does not destroy and can never totally escape the system it tries to question. "It is not that he [Derrida] believes that we can merely rid ourselves of the urge to forge such [logocentric] principles, for such an impulse is deeply imbedded in our history,

and cannot- at least as yet- be eradicated or ignored. Derrida would see his own work as inescapably 'contaminated' by such metaphysical thought, much as he strives to give it the slip" (Eagleton 114).

The Argument

"What if there is no presence in whom we can find ultimate truth? What if all our knowledge does not arise from self-identity? What if there is no essence, being, or inherently unifying element in the universe? What then?" (Bressler, 125). This thesis tries to look at Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* under the light of deconstructive theories and concepts. This particular novel provides some elemental fields of discussion concerning the "metaphysics of presence" and also about the way different classes of beings are described (which is through the process of differentiation, both differing and deferring). We can trace the erosion of self and lack of closure and where and how and to what effect do the instances of "aporia" happen.

As soon as we start talking about literature, science fiction or this particular novel by Clarke, we are using the concept of differentiation, "each instance is intelligible in its resemblance to and difference from other parallel texts, or intertextuality. . . epics invoke and differ from other epics; individual instances of science fiction take their differential place within a tradition of science fiction" (Maplas & Wake, 46-7). In poststructuralist way of thinking, fiction does not reflect reality but creates an illusion of it, in other words fiction could be a signifier for the signified reality as we know it. So in a sense there can be no reading of a text that is not in one way or another deconstructive in nature.

Even the fact that we keep reading and understanding science fiction could be explained through deconstructive concepts, "although there is no understanding independent of the signifier, there is always more than one account of reality in circulation, and we are thus able to place ourselves outside what society presents as obvious" (Maplas & Wake 53). So it is more than ordinary to try and have a deconstructive reading of any text. This particular text other than the ideas discussed above provides good bedding for other deconstructive notions as well.

The reason why deconstructive notions have been applied to humans and other characters of the story and not only to the text and its linguistic properties is that in deconstruction everything is inter-dependent and we also have to define what we mean by text. "For deconstruction, if language is the ground of being, then the world is infinite text, that is, an infinite chain of signifiers always in play. Because human beings are constituted by language, they, too, are texts" (Tyson, 250). Now why do we say that everything is made from language? That is because without language things cannot be differentiated from one another. The word 'human', in order to mean something is placed within the language and compared with whatever word and concept that exists in it. Just like deconstruction, the story is seeking a revolution in all aspects of human life and understanding. So, in a sense, the whole story is a deconstructive campaign in its questioning the ways of humans and life.

The project of escaping the center or getting rid of transcendental signified by travelling into space on the wings of science fiction seems doomed from the outset. In *the Writer's Dictionary of Science Fiction*, Jeff Colburn has used the words god and goddess more than seven hundred times. This shows that the realm of science fiction has not been immune from the logocentric system of perception. In fact science fiction is just another form of using language. It is almost unbelievable how we as readers try to look over contradictions and the lack of meaning in a text. "Roland Barthes opens *le Plaisir de l'exte* by asking us to

imagine a bizarre creature who has rid himself of the fear of self-deconstruction. Who mixes reputedly incompatible languages and patiently endures charges of illogicality. The rules of our institutions, Barthes writes, would make such a person an outcast. Who after all can live in contradiction without shame? Yet this anti-hero exists. He is the reader of texts at the moment when he takes his pleasure" (Culler, *on deconstruction*, 31).

This research does not actually try to prove anything. Deconstruction is not a tool to prove or deny something. It is more like a pair of glasses one can put on and look at things from another point of view. There is also no one point of view allocated to the practice of deconstruction; it is plural and celebrates this plurality. As a result different notions discussed in the theories of deconstruction are mentioned and then followed in the text. Some questions that this thesis will try to answer would be:

- To what extent does the story follow the standards of a logocentric ideology?
- How essential are the notions of "differance" and "presence" to the development of the story?
- Does the writer misspeak?
- What underlying ideologies or violent hierarchies does the text seem to favor?
- Does the text or the characters reach any sort of closure?

Thesis Outline

The body of this thesis is comprised of three chapters respectively named 'differance', 'the individual and the society', and 'communication'. In the first chapter, the researcher talks

about how there is always a center at the heart of each center and how this center defines everything and yet escapes getting entangled in the process of signification itself. The researcher talks about how unnatural and completely arbitrary this center is and then goes on to discuss how total signification is never achieved because definition is always deferred. The fact that there is no closure leaves the text an undecided and open field.

In the second chapter, some conventions and underlying ideologies in the society of the text and in the text itself are revealed and how these underlying ideologies are related to the politics of the text in an active deconstructive reading. As deconstruction encourages and celebrates plurality and individuality, these notions are also traced in the text. The text seems to favor these concepts but it finally misspeaks and destroys individuality in favor of universality and unification.

The last chapter is based on some theories of language and how language never actually means or fails to mean anything. Then the researcher goes on and talks about the metaphysics of presence which prevails in the text. No one seems to be content with writing but wants to see or at least hear the message.

On any account, what happens in each chapter is not total deconstruction. On the impossibility of total deconstruction and escape from what deconstruction is trying to subvert Derrida in his *writing and difference* says: "we have no language- no syntax and no lexicon- which is foreign to [this] history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest" (Green & LeBihan, 217). This can also be justified by Derrida's belief that things do not exist outside the realm of linguistic knowledge. Even if you disagree with the status quo, you have no other tools to confront it but itself and by using it you are actually confirming its existence instead of denying it. We have no other terminology

Or history outside the one we are deconstructing and even if escape were somehow possible, by questioning the old center, we are simply replacing it with a new one.

Approach and Methodology

Writing about deconstruction is not an easy task. As soon as one starts writing about it, there are many who claim that this is not at all what deconstruction is about. This is quite natural bearing in mind deconstruction's resistance to being defined and its enjoying the plurality caused. So the writer will try to maneuver on topics that have become the standard issues normally discussed in a deconstructive reading.

Giving definitions does not really accord with the practice of deconstruction. Because at the heart of this approach, is escape from definition and the impossibility of it for that matter. But as mentioned before to fight a system is to be subdued by it because one has to use the same concept and terminology. For instance nothing means anything outside our logocentric and phonocentric way of thought. When you try to question this way of thinking, if you want to be understood you have to follow the same rules you are trying to subjugate. For instance Derrida tries so hard not to define things but he has to explain to us what he meant, for instance, by the word 'différance'. So what he does is to resort to a non-definition in *margins of philosophy*: "there is not a proper essence of différance...this unnamable is the play which makes possible nominal effects...the nominal effect différence is itself enmeshed, carried off, reinscribed..." (Green & LeBihan, 216-17). But things are even more complicated than that when you treat a logocentric notion (like definition here) deconstructively, although your deconstruction is never truly pure because it is tainted and trapped within logocentrism, it also works the other way around. Once you have become familiar with deconstruction, you can never escape that too. In the example above, that is the

instance of defining difference, you might try and give a clear picture of the term but at the same time this is deconstructively impossible; because you can never truly express and the reader can never truly conceive the meaning. It is only a play of the chain of signifiers, so difference can never actually mean anything. "Derrida's definition of the term is a non-definition; he says that 'there is not a proper essence of difference.' He argues that its function in language is that which makes possible 'nominal effects', nominal effects being what we conventionally understand as linguistic meaning. Crucially though, he argues that the term difference is not privileged above other linguistic signs or nominal effects. Difference itself is subject to the same effect that the term delineates...differing and deferring along a signifying chain. Although it is a term that we have singled out for attention, Derrida is at pains to point out that this should not be the case" (Green & LeBihan, 217).

Nietzsche's theories developed into two different stems that define poststructuralism. "(1) that of the skeptical scholar, who exposed the will to power, the revolt of reactionary forces, and the emergence of a subject-centered reason, a position formative for the anthropological, psychological and historical perspectives of Bataille, Lacan, and Foucault; and (2) that of the initiate-critic of metaphysics, who took on subject philosophy by initiating a return to pre-Socratic philosophy, a position represented by Heidegger and Derrida" (Rush, 291-2).

According to Derrida, "there is not one deconstruction, and deconstruction is not a single theory or a single method" (qtd. Vandenberg 122). The Deconstructive approach applied to Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* is mostly in its basic Derridean form. The key concepts of Deconstruction such as "presence", "phonocentrism", "logocentrism", "difference" and "aporia" are used as a particular point of view from which the different aspects of the book have been discussed. For example the fact that the humans are always desirous to see the "overlords" is seen as a proof of the existence of the "metaphysics of

presence" and the way it works in man's life and the fact that they still prefer hearing the "overlords" rather than getting notes from them is considered to be indicative of the "phonocentricity" of our minds and attitudes. It has also been tried to point out some of the violent hierarchies present at the work and although this is not the main purpose of this paper, to subvert them or prove their instability to some extent.

It is believed that the text in hand very much like all other texts in many instances, misspeaks or contradicts itself. Some of such instances are mentioned in this work and the consequent results of such "aporia" in reading the text are also considered. Using the ways the different classes of being, that is; humans, new humans, overlords and the overmind describe one another, the concept of "differance" and lack of "closure" and the "inescapability" from the "logocentric" way of existence both in its physical form and in the use of the already existing signifiers of conventionality are also discussed. The different 'logos' existing in the text, especially the 'self' and the 'overmind' are pointed out and proving their differentiability or self-deconstruction, are refuted. The either/ or mentality or logic of the text in hierarchical binary oppositions like culture/ nature, war/ peace, overlord/ human, overmind/ overlord, order/ chaos and so on and so forth is revealed and it is discussed that the text itself is not sure of the hierarchies it seems to advocate. The allegorical nature of the text and yet the reader's and writer's striving to get to some determinacy which is a De Manian concept is briefly touched upon and the very allegorical title of the book is brought into attention which is both "undecidable" and "aporitic". The "plurality" and lack of "closure" in the way the story ends and about the concept of the "self" and the search for meaning are looked at from both a negative and a positive point of view and the impossibility of a total deconstruction of the text is also mentioned. And again not as a major goal of this work, some of the underlying ideological projects of the text are revealed.

Trying to have a postmodern reading of science fiction is doubly illusive. "Given that science fiction is notoriously difficult to define, and that postmodernism is (usually) resistant to any absolute definition, any account of postmodernism and science fiction risks collapsing under the weight of its own hesitations...It should perhaps be taken for granted that much postmodernism reads like science fiction" (James & Mendlesohn, 137). So the reader of this dissertation is very much dealing with non-definable and illusive notions as the reader of postmodernism or science fiction is.

Tony Hoagland in his poem *the Deconstruction* has compared deconstructors to an army of ants taking away the "carcass of a dog" (Hoagland 381). But "deconstruction is always carefully distinguished from destruction... like Derrida and Paul De Man, Miller in fact insists on the undoing/preserving...deconstruction is not a breaking down of a hierarchical opposition in order to establish a lower term in the situation of the displaced" (Atkins 304).

Definition of Terms

Defining deconstruction is almost impossible. 'Almost' because one has to give a definition in the end since there is no escape from having to form a basis upon which to erect other things; a definition works in this way. "Unfortunately finding such a simple, unconventional meaning ...is all but impossible...this sort of clear and concise process of identification and definition is one of the key elements of rationality that the postmodern sets out to challenge" (Malpas, 4). But as mentioned before, even the postmodern cannot escape what it challenges. "For many people, the mere mention of the word 'postmodernism' brings immediately to mind ideas of fracturing, fragmentation, indeterminacy and plurality, all of which are indeed key postmodern figures...it is important to recognize that postmodernity is itself already a

discourse that is fractured and fragmentary" (Malpas 5). The problem also lies in the intertextuality of all texts and that at many times definitions overlap. "No key idea is definitively separable from another in Derrida's work" (Royle, 17). These are some of the terms that are repeatedly used in this dissertation. All the definitions are taken from Malpas & Wake's book:

Aporia: A Greek term that denotes an insoluble problem or paradox; etymologically it comes from 'aporos' meaning 'impassable'. In rhetoric and literary theory, it is often used to indicate those moments in the text where meaning becomes ambiguous or appears self-contradictory. In his book *Aporias*, Jacques Derrida differentiates an aporia from a problem, arguing that the former is 'the experience of the nonpassage... what, in sum, appears to block our way or to separate us in the very place where it would no longer be possible to continue a problem, a project, or a projection. In other words, while a problem can be resolved within the rules of logical argument, an aporia calls those very rules into question and remains impossible to incorporate into a straightforward logic.

Differance: A term coined by Jacques Derrida, which forms a central stand to his attack on the logic and values of traditional Western philosophy. Perhaps unhelpfully, Derrida claims in *Margins of Philosophy* (1972) that differance is 'literally neither a word nor a concept' and that it 'has neither existence nor essence'. What is clear, however, is that differance derives from the Latin verb 'differre' and the French 'differer', which in English have given rise to two distinct verbs: to defer and to differ. Differance incorporates both of these meanings and thus serves to emphasize two key Derridean concerns: with absence rather than presence (full meaning is never present, but is instead constantly deferred because of the differance characteristic of language); and with difference rather than identity (Derrida focuses on the difference between terms, and the spaces between words, rather than on the terms in themselves and any positive value they might otherwise be thought to have).

Intertextuality: A term employed by poststructuralist critics. To say that a text's meaning is 'intertextual' is to claim that it derives its meanings from its relationships with other texts, for example through overt or covert allusions and references. Meaning is not, therefore, something which inheres in that text and only that text; it is relational. Similarly, no text is seen as autonomous; instead, every text is made up of many other texts.

Logocentrism: A term emerging from the deconstructive philosophy of Jacques Derrida, it is derived from the Greek 'logos', meaning 'word' (but also sometimes 'thought' or 'reason'). Derrida attacks what he identifies as the logocentrism of Western philosophy: its search for a foundation to all knowledge in a logic or reason or truth which is self-evident and self-confirming. In particular he criticizes the emphasis on presence within Western philosophy: for example, the belief in self-presence as the essence of being and the foundation of knowledge.

Metaphysics: A branch of philosophical enquiry which is primarily concerned with first principles, in particular those concerning the question of existence. Metaphysics represents a search for foundations and origins within philosophy. It centers on the question of 'what is' and seeks to discover an encompassing solution to the problem of the nature of existence.

Phonocentrism: The Western culture's preference of speech over writing and considering writing a mere representation of speech.

Supplement: Derrida extends the contradictory logic of the word 'supplement' in order to interrogate the conventional Western idea that speech, as the original form of language, is merely represented by writing. A supplement could be thought of as the unprivileged part of a violent hierarchy.

Chapter Two

Differance

Description via Differance

Meaning is attributed to difference. "Even the simplest story differs from the other stories that it also resembles. While both are fairytales, 'Beauty and the Beast' differs from 'Cinderella'...each instance is intelligible in its resemblance to and difference from other parallel texts. Epics invoke and differ from other epics; individual instances of science fiction take their differential place within a tradition of science fiction" (Malpas & Wake, 47). So as soon as we start talking about science fiction, Clarke, and this particular book, we are following the process of differentiation. As soon as we start we are using differance which is at the heart of deconstruction.

"The primary property of language is that it differentiates. We can confirm that vocabulary is not acquired simply by pointing to referents (things in the world)" (Malpas & Wake, 43). There are no overlords in the known world of human beings, but no one can deny their existence because they have a name and certainly differ from anything they have already seen. Not only the child learns the meaning of the words 'dog' and 'cat' through differentiation, but also "later the child will go on to learn to use words such as 'justice' and 'honesty'" (Malpas & Wake, 43), which are totally abstract entities with no image that