CONVERSATIONAL DECONSTRUCTION IN RAMANA MAHARSHI'S DIALOGUES

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Abstract : *It is claimed in the paper that Indian spiritual literature and teaching practices also follow deconstructive modes of inquiry quite similar to Derridean deconstruction of textual reading. Deconstruction is a way of reading texts with the intention of (a) making the texts question themselves, (b) forcing them to take account of their own contradiction, and (c) exposing the antagonism they have ignored or repressed (Saul Newman). In other words, it a strategy of dismantling conceptual oppositions and hierarchical systems of thought and unmasking of aporias in philosophy. This has not far off similarities with the spiritual quest as seen through the prism of the spiritual teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi. Derrida and other theorists were perhaps were not aware of this implication of deconstruction.*

This paper makes a humble attempt at bringing out dynamic spirit of conversational deconstruction in Indian spiritual thinking with exclusive reference to the actual teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi applying the terminology and strategies of Derridean deconstruction.

Key Words: *deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, logocentrism, Indian spiritual literature, Ramana Maharshi*

Since Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher, presented a paper entitled "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" at Johns Hopkins University in 1966, which was later on elaborated in various books, a strategic methodology of reading texts known as deconstruction has popularity among philosophers and literary critics in America and Europe. It challenges the long established Western metaphysical thinking since Plato showing how what had been thought as final, fixed, unified, reasonable and self-evident is unstable, contradictory and undecidable. In fact, that deconstruction as a method of close reading has wider implications in social, psychological and ideological discourses becomes clear from Derrida's words:

> "Now, to read does not mean to spend nights in the library; to read events, to analyse the situation, to criticize the media, to listen to the rhetoric of the demagogues, that's close reading, and it is required more today than ever. So I would urge politicians and citizens to practise close reading in this new sense, and not simply to stay in the library." (Derrida, HJR 67).

Thereafter, deconstruction has been successfully adopted by various theorists, for instance, in the American academy, specifically by Paul de Man, as a critical approach to

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literature. Other theorists tried to link deconstruction with Marxism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Law, Architecture, etc.

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This paper makes a humble attempt at bringing out dynamic spirit of conversational deconstruction in Indian spiritual thinking with exclusive reference to the actual teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi applying the terminology and strategies of Derridean deconstruction.

A general framework of deconstructive strategies employed by Ramana Maharshi in his dialogues with spiritual seekers to bring about the deconstruction of the logocentric and dualistic thinking patterns and of the self-identity is explicated. These deconstructive strategies become obvious in the teacher-seeker dialogues concerning certain specific spiritual problems of the seekers and in the public discourses on general spiritual topics. All kinds of spiritual or psychological problems with which seekers used to visit Ramana Maharshi to be resolved were diagnosed to be structured in logocentric and dualistic thinking patterns. Logocentric thinking operates along the hierarchical oppositional categories in which one term elevates itself to the position of logos by suppressing and excluding other terms. The self – the sovereign of the human subjectivity – is one such central term as logos that is deconstructed by Ramana Maharshi in the personal dialogues. The strategies used to bring this about are specific to, and dependent on, the text/narrative of the seekers' problems.

In the following teacher-seeker interaction Ramana Maharshi used the strategy of inversion to deconstruct traditional religious beliefs and practices:

[Seeker]: Is it necessary to take *sannyasa* (a vow of renunciation) in order to attain Self-realisation?

[Ramana]: '*Sannyasa*' means renouncing one's individuality, not shaving one's head and putting on ochre robes. A man may be a householder but if he does not think he is one he is a *sannyasin*. On the other hand, he may wear ochre robes and wander about, but so long as he thinks he is a *sannyasin* he is not one. To think about one's renunciation defeats the purpose of renouncing (Teachings of Bhagavan 74)..

Here, Ramana deconstructs the hierarchical opposition between the privileged condition of a *sannyasi* and the secondary status of a householder. He treats the binary terms *sannyasi* versus householder as supplements of each other, one being as good as the other, rather than as logocentric opposition structured in 'violent hierarchy' by showing that it is the

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intending subject that is common and remains intact in both the conditions. Exposing the specious tendency of thinking and living in mutually exclusive and hierarchical conceptual categories, he points out that the substitution of one condition for the other does not solve the problem, it may exacerbate it further. Such divisive thinking that functions only along the set dualistic patterns established by tradition or formed by one's own experiences, undermines its own avowed purpose as it fails to deliver what it promises. As Ramana points out "To think about one's renunciation defeats the purpose of renouncing." Thus he deconstructs not only the seeker's desire to renounce the householder's life but also the whole spiritual traditional discourse that privileges *sannyasi* over householder.

The same deconstructive strategy is seen in the following dialogues:

[S]: Isn't *Brahmacharya* (celibacy) necessary for realization of the Self?

[R]: *Brahmacharya* means 'living in Brahman'; it has no connection with celibacy as commonly understood. A real *Brahmachari* is one who lives in Brahman and finds bliss in Brahman, which is the same as the Self. Why, then, should he look for other sources of happiness? In fact, it is emergence from the Self that is the cause of all misery. (Teachings of Bhagavan 74).

[Seeker]: Is there any efficacy in bathing in the Ganges?

[Ramana]: The Ganges is within you. Bathe in this Ganges; it will not make you shiver with cold. (Teachings of Bhagavan 51)

In these interactions Ramana Maharshi unscrupulously changes the literal and conventional meaning of religious terms and practices such as *Sannyasa, celibacy, dipping in the holy Ganges*, etc. sanctified in the scriptures with etymological, or at times metaphorical, meaning so as to undercut seeker's attachment to dualistic patterns of thinking and living. This so profoundly re-inscribes the term concerned that it no longer fits in as the one side of the opposition (Sannyasin-householder, celibacy-licentiousness, ritualistic-experiential). Though this strategic reversal of semantics of the terms in question is not a complete deconstruction, it has a liberating effect on the seeker's perception and understanding.

Here, the seeker is challenged to embark on deconstructive spiritual inquiry, not to remain content with so-called religious and mechanical activities. Ramana's move of reinterpreting the traditional religious concepts disrupts the seeker's longstanding dichotomous thinking patterns structured in oppositional categories that opens up a new possibility for "the irruptive emergence of a new "concept", a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime" (Derrida, Positions 42), a possibility of perceiving himself and the world that was no longer possible earlier being anchored in *logos* and trapped in oppositional categories. This inquiry does not come to an end until the inquiry is itself deconstructed in the same way as "the stick used to stir the funeral pyre" is itself consumed in the fire.

One classic example of logocentrism engendered problems is the following dialogue:

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[S]: Why does God place us in difficulties? Why did He create us?

[R]: Does God come and tell you that He has placed you in difficulties? It is you who say so. It is again the wrong 'I'. If that disappears there will be no one to say that God created this or that. That which is does not even say 'I am'. For, does any doubt rise that 'I am not'? Only in such a case should one be reminding oneself 'I am a man'. One does not. On the other hand, if a doubt arises whether he is a cow or a buffalo he has to remind himself that he is not a cow, etc., but 'I am a man.' This would never happen. Similarly with one's own existence and realisation. (Talks 170)

Implicit in the text of the questioner is the generalized assumption that presupposes God as some pre-existing extra-linguistic reality to which the questioner is attributing his sufferings. Whether there is an ontological God who is behind all his sufferings cannot be verified but the textual assumption of God being behind all human sufferings is enough to create logocentric sedimentation in consciousness that disorient epistemological purity and sustain textually created sufferings. So Ramana Maharshi does not concern himself with the ontological and metaphysical reality of God as such but with the textually assumed God and its repercussions for the believers.

It is clear that the questioner is arguing from the logocentric premise that has placed God as a creator of the world and himself, and Ramana Maharshi knows that once his logocentric premise accepted or rejected, there can be no satisfactory end to proliferation of argumentation as one argument will lead to another *ad infinitum*. So he does not support or refute the belief of the questioner; rather he invites the questioner to reverse the subject-object relation of belief statement so as to let him experience his own involvement and contribution to the problem faced by him. This reversal of subject-object relation breaks apart the person's thinking pattern causing him to question his own question and transfers his attention from 'God the Creator and Me the Victim' (theocentric) position to 'Me the Mischief-maker' (egocentric) position. From the newly acquired awareness of his own 'self' involvement in sustaining his problem, the person is ready to set on self-deconstructive investigation of egocentrism that ends in self-realization. In the reply, Maharshi used a very sophisticated deconstructive strategy that not only bypassed the question of God as irrelevant to the problem in question, but exposed logocentric thought in the form of 'I' that ultimately is required to be deconstructed as both theocentric and egocentric positions are but the forms of logocentrism.

Another strategy used by Ramana Maharshi is to turn the questions against the questioner and so effect a deconstruction of the logocentric self-identity of the seekers.

[Seeker]: Who am I?

[Ramana]: Find it yourself.

[Seeker]: I do not know.

[Ramana]: Think. Who is it that says 'I do not know?' What is not known? In that statement, who is the 'I'? (Talks 62)

This seemingly simple instruction to answer 'Who am I?' provokes the seeker experientially to search for his/her self which is fundamentally experientially unanswerable. What is readily assumed instantly available by the seeker is found to be unfindable. This deconstructs the notion of any graspable self that puts the seeker in "the experience of the impossible" or aporia, which Derrida equates with deconstruction of 'false concept of self'

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(Derrida, Force 243). This state of aporia is not tantamount to being in despair or nihilism. It is freedom from compulsive identification and privileging of choices / decisions that dichotomizes the consciousness. Aporia is a moment that opens up new possibilities for responding when all set-patterns of thinking and acting are found to be inadequate to the challenges of life. As aptly explained by Wortham, "To endure the 'impossibility' of an aporia is thus to risk the chance of an 'other' possibility, an impossible possibility that is perhaps the only one worth its name. (Wortham 15)." The question 'Who am I?' is so self-deconstructive that after "destroying all other thoughts, [it] will itself finally be destroyed like the stick used for stirring the funeral pyre". (Be As You Are 56).

It is easy for a seeker to get perplexed about the right choice of method for realization when different paths are advocated. Instead of suggesting some path to clear the confusion, Ramana Maharshi deconstructs the very notion of paths as being based on false construction. For him, realization is always already a reality requiring no further efforts.

[Seeker]: Since they have recommended different paths which is one to follow?

[Ramana]: You speak of paths as if you were somewhere and the Self somewhere else and you had to go and reach it. But in fact, the Self is here and now and you are that always. It is like you being here and asking people the way to Ramanasramam and complaining that each one shows a different path and asking which to follow. (Day 274).

In the aforementioned dialogue, Ramana Maharshi uses a potent deconstructive strategy for negation of path-destination dichotomy which undoes the idea of spiritual progress in time.

To deconstruct traditionally sanctified concepts and practices Ramana Maharshi either (a) tries to bypass the concepts in question or redefines and appropriate them as synonyms to the Self and (b) brings back the seeker to deconstructing his own logocentric self-identity, limited personal self or ego, with the dismantling of which results in emergence of the unbound undivided consciousness called the Self. This brings Ramana Maharshi close to Derridean deconstruction as metaphorically characterized by Jonathan Culler as "chopping off the branch on which one is sitting" which is quite analogous to spiritual inquiry employed by Ramana Maharshi in that he too takes away all supports that prop up the false sense of the divisive self. (On Deconstruction 149).

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