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DECONSTRUCTION AND REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM: A
COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN DERRIDA AND NĀGĀRJUNA

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Introduction:

In 1966, Jacques Derrida at a seminar on Structuralism at a University in America Derrida did introduce the notion of ‘Deconstruction’ which is taken from Heidegger to sweep off the veil of the metaphysics in philosophy since the age of Idealist tradition of Greek Philosophy to the structuralism of post modern philosophy. Although Logical Positivists and analytic philosophers like Wittgenstein, Searle, Austin, raised their objections to all kinds of metaphysics. Derrida’s deconstruction has shown the process of revisiting all structures of philosophical thought that had got centre. David F. Burton, who reviewed Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way, in his book “Emptiness Appraised: a Critical Study of Nāgārjuna’s Philosophy” argued that “a trans-cultural and trans- historical rationality can bridge the interpretive challenges of time, tradition, and language between contemporary Western scholars and Nagarjuna, despite the obscurity of the texts, themselves veiled under millennia of accumulated commentarial traditions” (Burton, 2003, p.602).

Derrida’s perspective of the concepts like human subject and binary oppositions, many researchers have comprehended that Derrida’s theory seems to be similar to the Buddhist Nāgārjuna in Indian philosophical tradition. Such attempt of interaction between Derrida and Indian classical philosophical thought found in Robert Magliola’s ‘Derrida On the Mend’ which has emphasized on Derrida’s concept of ‘differance’ and Nāgārjuna’s devoidness (Magliola, 1984, p.87). David Loy opines, “Derrida himself fits into all this. The tone Derrida identifies within all Western philosophical discourse is even more audible from outside, especially from the Indian tradition which, in contrast, consists of a set of more-or-less distinct schools that developed side-by-side, as commentators added their notes to sub-commentaries to commentaries on sacred texts” (Loy, 1932, p.32). Derrida tried to efface all the philosophical including metaphysical, epistemological presumptions by his theory or process of deconstruction and the similar thing was done by Nāgārjuna thousand of years ago. He also questioned the already established metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions in Indian philosophy.

Nāgārjuna through his dialectical method of Reductio ad absurdum or *prasanga* questioned the metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions and even analyzed the nature of reason by reason. Thus, *Nāgārjuna*’s theory is very often misinterpreted and he is criticized as a nihilist as same as

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Derrida's deconstruction is also misinterpreted sometimes.

Derrida is one of the most important philosophers in twentieth century and his book "Of Grammatology" began a new perspective in literary criticism. He talked about the method of reading a book or text and at what extent we can control the use of language. As described by Biesta, Derrida is concerned about the difference between writing and reading and how it leads us to misunderstanding of a notion. He makes difference between phonocentricism and logocentricism; phonocentricism talks about the spoken world whereas logocentricism is all about the world of writing (Biesta, 2001). According to Derrida, writing takes the place of communication where speech fails. As Cohen expresses, "Literature is for Derrida the possibility for any utterance, writing, or mark to be iterated in innumerable contexts and to function in the absence of identifiable speaker, context, reference, or hearer" (Cohen, 2002). Any text of literature or science can be reinterpreted by the reader from a new perspective so that he can rectify the understanding of that text. Hence, Derrida's writing or thought leaves a new room for probing philosophical notions. Besides "Of Grammatology", Derrida wrote two other books namely "writing and difference", "Speech and phenomena". Derrida produced a new theory of deconstruction and he emphasized on the term "difference", he made an ontological difference between being and different modes of being or its existence. According to Derrida, languages is used to be operated on the basis of differentiation because a word is used to refer to a certain object and it means that it is different from other objects or it is different from what is referred by other words in a linguistic system where meaning are not fixed rather it is always said to be contaminated.

However, *Nāgārjuna* or entire Buddhism or Buddhist philosophical thought was flourished in the ancient age in Indian philosophical tradition still it seems significant to discuss its relevance and relation with the system of Derrida's deconstruction in the post modern age because Nāgārjuna's *sunyavada* is also a form of deconstruction. There is cultural, social and so many differences between the theories of Indian philosophy and Derrida or other western philosophers' theories. Many philosophers have talked about the differences between Nagarjuna and Derrida's dialectic and deconstruction in comparative western philosophy.

Some parallels between Derrida and *Nāgārjuna*:

In a study, Cai Zong Qi talked about considering the relationship between linguistic deconstruction and onto-theological criticism through some anti philosophical ways. He also found some significant parallels between Derrida and *Madhyamika*, as follows:

They both developed deconstructive theories of meaning that are diférance and diferentiam, and tried to invalidate or nullify the logos and the notion of non existence in more concrete way by Western idealists and Buddhist essentialists.

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They both deconstruct matter and existence by same theories of meaning. They both conceived double negation as a practice of neither-nor logic and tried to establish formulas of deconstruction in quite similar terms of ‘tetrapharmakon’ and ‘tetralemma’ (Zong-qi, 1993, p. 183-195).

Perhaps, between Derrida- *Madhyamika* thought, there is still a lot important parallels need to be discovered. Here, in this short research paper, I will discuss the relationship between Derrida’s deconstruction and *Nāgārjuna*’s dialectic from some aspects.

Derrida and *Nāgārjuna* critically investigated the entire history of western and philosophy and its presuppositions respectively. Derrida tried to deconstruct various structures or notions or presuppositions of western philosophy starting from Plato to his age of philosophers. Similarly, *Nāgārjuna* raised question against the *astika tattva* and also the Buddhist *abhidarmika* schools.

He followed *catuskoti* to refute not only the idealistic and materialistic views but also to four noble truth to examine whether it leads to a contradiction or not and for him, all sufferings are due to holding on to a one absolute view. The areas where we compare and find relation between Derrida and *Nāgārjuna*’s theory of deconstruction and reduction ad absurdum are:

Objection against nihilism and absolutism on Derrida and *Nāgārjuna*:

Similarly, as I have mentioned in the above that they both are criticized as a nihilist we can compare them from this point of view. Even question arises that Derrida is not at all a philosopher; W. V. Quine considered Derrida’s philosophical problem as pseudo problem. Searle made a comment on Derrida’s deconstruction that, “anyone who reads deconstructive texts with an open mind is likely to be struck by the same phenomena that initially surprised me: the low level of philosophical argumentation, the deliberate obscurantism of the prose, the wildly exaggerated claims, and the constant striving to give the appearance of profundity by making claims that seem paradoxical, but under analysis often turn out to be silly or trivial” (Burton, 2003, p.603). However, Derrida’s concept of logocentrism, phonocentrism, deconstruction theory is appreciated by a large group of intellectuals all over the world. Similarly, Harsh Narain in his writing “The Madhyamika Mind” objected *Madhyamika* as, “The *Madhyamika* method is to examine the various modes of being countenanced by commonsense and philosophies in general and to repudiate all of them by showing that they lack law, lack logic and hence is a chaos rather than a cosmos. This is surely a chaotic or rationalistic conception of reality” (Narain, 1997, p. 109).

Some critics opine that Derrida’s intention of explaining everything as an act difference would lead him be considered as a nihilist. Since deconstruction denies the idea of a fixed centre, it says that there is no fixed and absolute meaning of a text. Thus as it denies the absolutism or any absolute meaning of a text then it can seem to be conveying the meaning of nothingness.

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Therefore, it also means that any kind of interpretation of the text is true. Similarly, objection rose against the deconstructive theory to be nihilistic because Derrida is trying to undermine the ethical and intellectual principles that form the core of western philosophy. But in reply to this criticism we can say that such objection is the result of misinterpretation of his doctrine of deconstruction. Derrida says, “I regret that I have been misinterpreted in this way that people who wish to avoid questioning and discussion present deconstruction as a sort of gratuitous chess game with a combination of signs, closed up in language as in a cave. I totally refuse that label of nihilism, which has been ascribed to me. Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but openness towards the other” (Kearney, 1984, p.124). Derrida further opines that deconstruction is “to discover the non-place which would be that ‘other’ of philosophy” (Kearney, 1984, p.125). The same objection is also raised against the theory of *Nāgārjuna* as it promotes the theory of *sunyata*. The question would arise that if all the things are void then how they explain the true nature of the world? But in reply we can say that *Nāgārjuna* or entire Buddhist philosophy talks about rejection of substance from ontological perspective and maintains the middle path of nihilism and eternalism. People who misunderstood the real nature of his theory they think that voidness indicated to the nothingness but in actuality it means every organization is dependent on something and when we to explain the nature of a substance then we feel the difficulty in explaining such nature and from this perspective the idea of voidness or *sunyata* comes in.

Nagarjuna made his objection against the nihilist explanation as, “Beyond good and evil, profound and liberating, this doctrine of nothingness has not been tested by those who fear what is entirely groundless” (Kalupahana, 1991, p.31).

Differance & *Sunyata*:

Derrida questions several rigid centered conceptions and he tried to hammer them with the concept of differance. This differance makes distinction between two terms indicating two separate meanings; these are differing and deferring. According to David Loy, “Derrida shows only that language cannot grant access to any self-present meaning; his methodology cannot settle the question whether our relationship to language and the so-called objective world is susceptible to a radical transformation. The other possibility is that what all philosophy seeks, insofar as it cannot escape its apocalyptic tone, may be accessible in a different fashion” (Loy, 1992, p.235).

On the other hand, *Nāgārjuna* questions the conception of decentre with a little bit different ambiguous way. *Nāgārjuna* explained the object and theories with *sunyata*. This *sunyata* is used in various contexts in different way. *Nāgārjuna* explains that *sunyata* means the concept of *pratyasamutpāda* or the dependent origination. By promoting *pratyasamutpāda* *Nāgārjuna* may seem to be his centre. In social aspect we can comprehend that would have *Nāgārjuna* like Derrida.

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Concept of God:

Derrida and *Nāgārjuna* have stripped down the notion of self and God. However, there are different views among the different schools of Buddhism; some schools accept Gautama as God a God school accepts the *karma* (action) as God whereas no self theory is commonly accepted by all the schools of Buddhism. *Nāgārjuna* did not consider any entity as self or no- self since it would either lead to eternalism and annihilations respectively. In *Nāgārjuna*'s articulation, "when the sphere of thought has ceased, that which is to be designated also has ceased. Like freedom, the nature of things is non-arisen and non-ceased" (Kalupahana, 1991). Thus, no concept of God as presented by Derrida. Derrida's anti metaphysical perspective is the main operating power behind his deconstructive theory. John Caputo, in this regard, states, "Derrida is an atheist who has his own God and loves the name of the God" (Caputo, 2000, p.461). However, Derrida is against any transcendental being still he did not refused God.

Binary oppositions:

Derrida and *Nāgārjuna* implode the binary oppositions in their philosophical traditions. Derrida and *Nāgārjuna* analyzed the paired terms those have asymmetrical relationship exhibiting and have shown the logical impossibility and contradiction. In each case, there is a primary term called X and a modal term called Y which is dependent on the earlier. *Nāgārjuna* tried to show that the relationship between X and Y which is called xRy is quite absurd in nature. Following this technique one can show or explore the absurdity of any relationship in regard to the other propositions. Subject- object, cause-effect, entity- property, nirvana or freedom from life and life all are to be considered as meaningless. Similarly, in Derrida's deconstruction we can find that it dismantled the binary oppositions between two terms like reality and appearance, truth- fiction, signified and signifier, man and woman, speech- writing, and metaphor and metonymy where a dependency exist between two terms.

Differences between *Prasangapadana* and deconstruction:

When *Nāgārjuna* refutes various conceptions of philosophy that already exist by negative dialectics and try to how show the contradictions within that metaphysic or epistemological claim and shows its absurdity.

However, Derrida and *Nāgārjuna* though belong to different historical, geographical and cultural background still they both did the same work in philosophy. So many controversies revolves around the theories of *Madhyamika* and Derrida's deconstruction because of misinterpretation and misunderstanding and there are slight difference between these two theories as we have examined throughout this paper still we found that their aim of philosophy remain same.

According to *Nāgārjuna*, sticking to a particular view or approach is the reason to all suffering and this

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same statement or view is uttered by Derrida in his work that there is no absolute view or approach. Using such approach *Nāgārjuna* refutes the absoluteness of being whereas Derrida refutes the absoluteness of any doctrine in social-political framework. Therefore, we can say that Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction has direct connection to the political notions. Derrida's deconstruction raises question against different political ideologies. Derrida differs from Nagarjuna in the sense that deconstruction talks about scientific precision, logic and pluralistic tradition of post modern methodology instead of adopting religious and speculative nature of metaphysics. Refuting bad faith ad speculative metaphysics Derrida states in, "To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words 'proximity', 'immediacy', 'presence' the proximate, the own, and the pre-of presence, is my final intention in this book" (Chakraborty, 1976, p.38).

Concluding remarks:

We have discussed the similarities and differences between *Nāgārjuna*'s dialectic and Derrida's deconstruction. These two theories are complementary to each other and in this regard Magliola opines that Derrida's concept of logocentricism complement *Nāgārjuna*'s concept of *samvrti satya* and Derrida's differentialism complements of *Nāgārjuna*'s concept of *paramartha satya*. There are still a lot of areas of differences may be found between these two theories in respect to the soteriological, mystical, poetry, negative theology; *Nāgārjuna*'s school belongs to the soteriological tradition and applies negation where as deconstruction does not belong to the soteriological tradition but there may be a further analysis about Derrida's theology. Though Derrida and *Nāgārjuna* have difference in other from various aspects still rigorous and self deconstructive systems seem to be same. But there is still to be explored between Derrida and *Nāgārjuna* tradition.

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