

# **Telling the Dancer from the Dance: A Deconstructionist Engagement with Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Prisoner***

by

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## **Abstract**

The paper engages a deconstructionist's criticism on Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Prisoner*. An approach provoked by the 'undecidability and disagreements' by critics on certain semantic expressions in this creative work. It argues that it is only by reading the text within the possibilities inherent in deconstructionist theory and criticism that one would appreciate the diverse and varied readings and meanings exposed by critics on this text. Given that deconstructionism resists singularity in meanings within literary texts, it further, outlines such tenets and proceeds to demonstrate how they facilitate a plural reading, specifically to Okot's *Song of Prisoner*. It is, to this end, therefore that it combines theory and practice. Granted that deconstruction is a problematic and often controversial theoretical paradigm, this paper takes liberty to lay bare its different 'understandings' and 'interpretations' in an attempt to tame its very fluidity and undecidable nature.

## Introduction

“Is it possible to have a final reading of a text? I mean a correct interpretation, and is there an absolute meaning of a text?” These are the questions that a student asked when he came across the following statement by Aloo Ojuka - “I hope that I have sufficiently exposed this total misunderstanding of the meaning of *The Song of Prisoner*”. This in fact was Ojuka’s response to Atieno Odhiambo’s critical interpretation of Okot p’Bitek’s *The Song of Prisoner*. The student’s questions reminded me of an article I had read by Solomon O. Iyasere, in which he illustrates the process of criticism in an oral performance, which took place in Benin City where “The Murder of Adesua” was being presented. In that article, he notes that after one artist performed the story another was quick to point out the flaws of the first rendition, by re-creating the tragic story, giving it the following opening:

Please be patient, Open your ears and listen, stay awake wide-eyed to the end. I have the same tale to tell. A tale I know full too well not a plain tale as those that have reached your ears. Here is where my story ends. Forgive me for what defects there may be in this tale of Woe: Not for the old knots here and there, brought by Old tangles in the broken yarn but for those rifts brought by my own runs. Well a tale is not a tale, without a word or two on how it fares my ears are wide open to the ground for what errors you may find for one hand cannot wash itself clean. It needs the help of the others. (Iyasere in Durosimi, 1980:171-172).

The oral artist’s/critic’s confession that, ‘well a tale is not a tale, /without a word or two on how it fares’ and that, ‘for one hand cannot wash itself/it needs the help of the others,’ becomes very crucial as concerns the student’s question. It suggests the complementary role that exists between the creative process and the critical process. It implies that critical process is never final as “errors” are always introduced - ‘here is where my story ends / forgive me for what defects there may be’. For him to claim forgiveness for any “defects” is ironical. He had taken it open himself to re-tell the story because he felt that an earlier rendition had flaws. From his proclamations we can deduce that there is never a correct interpretation or an absolute meaning of a text: How is all this, then, important in answering the student’s questions?

The student wanted to know if there is a final reading, a correct interpretation and an absolute meaning. The artist/critic implicitly implies that it is not possible to have a correct interpretation or an absolute meaning. So, to answer the student comprehensively a reading and interpretation of interpretations on Okot p'Bitek's poem, *Song of Prisoner* is not only necessary but also inevitable. Through a reading of the critical interpretations by Atieno-Odhiambo, Aloo Ojuka and Margaret Marshment, it is hoped that the "confusion" in the student's mind will be cleared.

Derrida and other deconstructionists have said that the discourse of texts have no fixed centres of meanings leading to constant deferring of an absolute meaning. Therefore Derrida and the deconstruction enterprise become very significant in our quest to answer the student's interrogative. Thus, before we can answer the student's question we must get some grasp of the concept of deconstruction.

### **The Outside of Inside: Centre without Centre**

What is deconstruction? Like the student's questions this is not an easy question to answer. Answering this question is like trapping the wind. It is not even possible to define deconstruction. Deconstruction defies the very logic, process of definition. As we know it, to define is to characterise, to describe the nature of something making it clear, stating precisely its meaning and as such making it more vivid. Conversely, deconstructionists argue that meanings and definitions are not absolute but involve the spin-of a potentially endless play of signifiers rather than a concept tied firmly to the tail of a particular signifier. So, if this is the way deconstruction works then an attempt to define it can only be futile. Deconstruction itself is a denial of establishment of centre, origin and end to processes and structures. Moreover, they (deconstructionists) argue that there is no centre, because, centre closes off the play, which it opens up and makes possible; and that the centre of a structure is paradoxically within the structure and outside it. So, what we perceive as the centre is, in fact, not the centre.

Because deconstruction does not recognise a centre, origin or an end, defining it becomes extremely problematic. In other words, anything that involves the play of disruption of presence cannot be defined nor be described in simple terms. Derrida attests to this position when he argues that: "The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play, is always a play, of absence and presence" (Derrida in Lodge 1988:121).

Further, because deconstruction refers to a process of *differing* and *deferring* of meaning (from Derrida's difference, which puns on *difference* and *deference*) then a claim to define it is not only monumental but illusive: deconstruction frustrates the very efforts of "getting it right".

That the deconstructionists reject definition does not mean that deconstruction is incomprehensible; nor does this undermine its importance in the realm of literary theory and criticism. Whereas it is not easy to define deconstruction, we can still "understand" it through the perspectives taken by its proponents. For instance, Derrida greatly considered its main guru, in his arguments, conceives of deconstructive criticism as that, which aims to show that "any text inevitably undermines its own claims to have a determinate meaning, and licences the reader to produce his own meanings out of it by an activity of semantic free play (Derrida, 1988: 119). We can therefore say that, according to the deconstructionists, the text does not have authorising signature over its own meaning. The meaning is both within and without the text. Underlying this position is the privileging of the reader over the text in terms of meaning(s) creation and realisation(s).

Stretched further, the argument reveals that there is no fixed meaning in a text: the meaning is always in a state of fluidity and, therefore infinite because a text is a user of language, and the very nature of language exclude chances of finitude and totalization. More than this, the field of language is a field of infinite play of substitutions. Consequently, the same text, will allow innumerable interpretations; as such one cannot talk of a "final" nor "correct" interpretations. As Abrams would say:

...any attempt to define or interpret the significance of sign or chain of signs, sign-substitutions; whose self-effacing traces merely defer laterally, from substitution to substitution, the fixed and the present meaning (or the signified 'presence') we vainly pursue (Abrams, 1988:269).

Derrida articulates the same when he says that,

...a text is a sealed echo-chamber in which meanings are reduced to a chamber in which echolalia, a vertical and lateral reverberation from sign to sign of ghostly non-presences emanating from no voice, intended by no one, referring to nothing, bombinating in a void (Abrams, 1988:270).

Miller implies this fluidity of meaning when he describes the process of deconstructive criticism as,

that strange sort of chain without beginning or ending which no commanding elements (origin, god, underlying principle) may be identified, but in which there is always something earlier or something later to which part of the chain on which one focuses refers and which keeps the chain open and undecidable (Miller, 1988:282).

From the foregoing, it can be implied that deconstruction is more than a theoretical and critical perspectives. It transcends its own boundaries, and becomes a theory of theories and criticism of criticisms.

### **Beyond the Text**

Deconstruction criticism as a chain of rings where each ring opens to receive the next, enclosed by the next, and the whole possibly open-ended; and always open to the possibility of having another link added, would lead one to conclude that deconstruction is the “mother” of all literary theories and criticism. This is because emerging theories and critical perspectives are ever “-deconstructing” assumptions and conclusions of prior ones to assert their own authorities, but which also other emerging theories and critical perspectives will deconstruct. So, the evolution of theories in itself is a play of deconstruction as there are neither absolute meanings nor correct interpretations. This can well be demonstrated by the deconstructive principle of intertextuality, that dynamic nature of texts to undo other texts. The best examples can be derived from the post-colonial writings and criticism and feminists discourse. These discourses are ever involved in a play of deconstruction, deconstructing previous signifiers in a bid to imbue them with new meanings, interpretations and authorising signatures. An illustration of Derek Walcott’s *The Pantomime* largely reveals this play of meanings. *The Pantomime* re-reads, re-interprets and imbues with new meanings Daniel Defoe’s, text, *Robinson Crusoe*. This kind of exercise is enabled by Derrida’s argument that relational meanings that do exist between the signifier and the signified are never fixed but always in a state of circularity, since the sign is unstable, capable of being fixed, unfixed or re-fixed by different users and communities of users of language.

It is this nature of language that allows emerging theories and critical perspectives to deconstruct the coherence of discourses, signatures, structures and institutions of earlier texts, so as to establish their own assumptions, continuity and legitimacy of lineage, at the same time suppressing the discourses of earlier texts, which they oppose. Our readings of the interpretations of Okot's poem obtain their site from the foregoing premise. Each of the three interpretations situates it-self upon a particular theoretical/critical position; this seems to explain the diverse meanings. However, ironically, the meaning of each is as a result of denouncing the "error" found in a previous interpretation. And this echoes the sentiments of the artist/critic mentioned earlier. A situation where writing/ reading, rendition/listening are highly susceptible to "errors", which then lead to misinterpretations and the myriad meanings accruing out of different readings/listening.

### **Readings of Misreadings: Interpretation of Misinterpretations**

Jonathan Culler, in his readings of de Man, observes "readings have to engage each other in direct confrontations as one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and has to be undone by it (Culler, 1983: 247). Culler's observation is indeed very important in our reading and interpretation of interpretations of Okot's *Song of Prisoner*. To begin with, the other critics have interpreted Atieno-Odhiambo's reading as an "error", a "misreading" and therefore a "misinterpretation". Must we agree with Aloo Ojuka and Margaret Marshment? Culler argues that: "Certain features of the text lead to an entirely different reading of it and produce an irreducible heterogeneity both of which are thematized in the work (Culler, 1983:269-70). With this in mind, we are compelled to question the legitimacy of criticisms levelled against Odhiambo's criticism and interpretation of Okot's poem. We ask this because each reading indeed has a special status, authorizing it to judge an author; and that any reading that claims to rectify a prior interpretation is just another reading. To show that each reading is just another reading we will take a particular structure that the three critics seem to have read and interpreted as the "centre" of interpreting the meaning of the poem. This structure, reminds us of de Man's argument- (qtd. in Culler in 1983:246)- on the interpretation of W.B. Yeats's concluding lines in "Among School Children" of telling apart the dance from the dancer.

O Chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to Music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Whereas this line can be read both figuratively and literally, de Man suggests that the most apt meaning can only be achieved if the line is read literally because in such a sense we will possibly make the distinctions that would shelter us from the error of identifying what cannot be identified (Culler, 1983:246). But for Culler, the critic is at liberty to choose the reading that will give what can be seen as the most appropriate meaning: “Faced with suggestions, a critic may be inclined to ask which reading better accords with the rest of the poem” (Culler, 1983:246). The same would apply to the reading and interpretation of the structure “to dance and forget” in Okot’s poem. Odhiambo interprets this structure literally to mean a quest for freedom but freedom, which only leads to escapism.

Okot’s Prisoner is a hopeless man. Beyond the act of ridding us of one man who symbolized failure of the African leaders and misery for the people, the prisoner does not tell us what also there is for him to do. He does not even in the body of the poem analyse the objective reasons why it was possible for the tragedy of decadence on the part of leaders to happen. As is very obvious, the people and prisoner with them are still in dilemma. What does he want? To dance? The point is simply that we do not want to forget (Atieno-Odhiambo, 1973: 108).

But Ojuka’s reading reveals otherwise as reflected in his reading and interpretation of Odhiambo’s interpretation of the structure “to dance and forget”. For him, Odhiambo’s reading is a clear case of misreading and as such a “wrong” interpretation of the meaning of the entire poem. He argues that the phrase should not be read as an end in itself. Implicit within this argument is that the phrase is figural; and therefore is pregnant with meanings. In his criticism of Odhiambo he says that:

He goes on to build on charges based on the dance and forget refrain, but fails to notice two of the most important lines in the whole poem. Let me dance and forget for a small while. But the lines escape Odhiambo’s attention with disastrous consequences (Ojuka 1973:123).

Thus, for Ojuka, unlike Odhiambo the phrase is symbolic of the impending revolution. For Marshment, Odhiambo’s reading is right only to some extent. She thinks that Odhiambo’s reading would have been more accurate if he had recognised the irony in his critical literary engagements with Okot’s poem.

Odhiambo's criticism of the prisoner that he must not go out "to dance and forget" are often to the point but he is exactly wrong in ignoring the ironic placing of the prisoner in the context of the poem and its total meaning. Hence he misses the real meaning of the poem (Marshment, 1973:128). When Marshment claims that Atieno's criticism are often to the point and at the same time hazards that Atieno misses the real meaning of the poem because of his inability to recognize irony makes us to understand the position of the deconstructionists even better. Therefore, if Marshment can see a point in Odhiambo's reading and at the same time reckon that Odhiambo has missed the real meaning of the poem then that real meaning is always deferred; and there is no absolute meaning. Therefore, like Culler we can say that there are only particular readings, which seem to have privileged status and in many ways work to identify the successes and flaws of other readings. So, to the student, I can say like the deconstructionists that there is no final reading, no correct interpretation and no absolute meaning.

## **Conclusion**

The application of deconstruction to literary processes is quite problematic. Even its proponents have failed to clearly show how it should be used as a literary strategy. Indeed, Culler laments so desperately about this when he notes that:

Despite the manifest relevance to literary studies of the relations between reading and misreading, the implications of deconstruction for the study of literature are far from clear. Derrida frequently writes about literary works but has not dealt directly with topics such as the task of literary criticism, the methods of analysing literary language, or nature of meaning in literature (1983:180).

It is this apparent inadequacy of deconstruction as a literary theory and strategy of criticism that motivated this particular approach. In fact, this approach is both a theoretical and practical attempt to make deconstruction more relevant and closer to the scholarship of literature and criticism. However, because of the very nature of deconstruction, this attempt is just one ring in the chain of rings that deconstruction is.



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