

A Deconstructive Reading of Chandrashekhara B. Kambar's "The Fiend of the Folktales"

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The originator of "Deconstruction" was the French thinker Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) among whose precursors were Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) who had questioned the validity of basic philosophical concepts such as "knowledge", "truth" and "identity". Jacques Derrida's paper "Structure Sign and Play of Meaning in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" presented at a symposium at John Hopkins University in 1966 inaugurated a new critical movement in the United States of America. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was also his predecessor whose theory of psychoanalysis violated the traditional concept of a coherent human consciousness and a unitary self. It designates a theory of reading that claims to subvert or undermine the assumption that the system of language provides grounds that are adequate to establish the boundaries, the coherence or unity, and the determinate meanings of a text (Abrams 225).

Its argument questions the basic metaphysical assumptions of Western Philosophy since Plato. The Structuralist theory presupposes a notion that presumes a centre of meaning. A centre is desired as it guarantees being as presence. Western philosophy has developed innumerable terms which operate as centering principles. It should be noted that any attempt to subvert a concept is to get trapped in the terms which the concept depends upon. The creation of polarization in a system in terms of body/soul, good/bad and serious/unserious results in the either pole becoming the centre and guarantor of presence. The desire for a centre is said to be "logocentrism" in Jacques Derrida's *On Grammatology*.

Chandrashekhara B. Kambar's (b. 1934-) "The Fiend of the Folktales" is a poem that is ostensibly based on the idea/ideology of "Primitivism" especially "Chronological Primitivism" foregrounding a dichotomy between tradition/modernity or man/machine represented through the dichotomy between the fiend and the robot. The deconstructive reading of the text suggests that instead of foregrounding the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, or man and machine, it rather postulates

an implicit integration of tradition and modernity, man and machine as essential for progress and survival since it is not possible to survive merely with a glorious tradition alone but in full cognizance of material reality. An amalgamation of the two contrary entities holds the key to a balanced future. Abrams opines:

A primitivist is someone who prefers what is “natural” (in the sense of that which exists prior to or independently of human culture, reasoning, and contrivance) to what is “artificial” (in the sense of what human beings achieve by thought, activities, laws and conventions, and the complex arrangements of a civilized society).

(169)

In the poem, the fiend is shown to be the symbol of folklore and is known as “Roaring laughter”. In an age of technological innovations, the place of folklore is limited suggesting that carefree enjoyment was sought in an earlier era. The celebration, the spirit of entertainment is missing and man’s well of creativity and imagination has dried up. The reason is attributed to the numbing and debilitating effect of technology on man. As a result folklore is out of man’s imagination and the fiend is jobless. The fiend in the poem is a character from the folktale, which is in turn a creation of human culture and is not exactly “natural”, that is, existing prior to or independent of human culture. It is a product of human thoughts, activities and the complex arrangements of a civilized society: “The poem is an elegy for the vanishing indigenous cultures with their roots in oral and performative traditions, but also an elegy for man steadily turning into a machine” (*Literary Vistas* 28). The indigenous cultures have actually not disappeared in their entirety but have evolved as hybrid entities with the elements of progress and development added to them. The poem is considered to be based on “Primitivism” not because the fiend is portrayed to be “natural”, but because it is based on “Chronological Primitivism”.

Chronological primitivism signifies the belief that the ideal era of humanity’s way of life lies in the distant past, when men and women lived naturally, simply, and freely, and that the process of history has been a gradual decline from that happy stage into an increasing degree of artifice, complexity, inhibitions, prohibitions, and consequent anxieties and discontents in the psychological, social, and cultural order. In its extreme

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form, this ideal era is postulated as having existed in 'the state of nature,' before society and civilization had even begun; more commonly, it is placed at some later stage of development, and sometimes as late as the era of classical Greece. Many, but not all, cultural primitivists are also chronological primitivists (170). The poem espouses the ideology of "Chronological Primitivism" as it talks of an ideal past during which period the fiend's "Roaring laughter" was happy and led an idyllic life. His life is described in the following way:

Here, under this tree,
often slept
the fiend of our folktales.
Roaring laughter was his name!
His laughter was not crude or bad, though.
His story has no beginning, has no ending
Now he has no likes or dislikes.
The seven seas have dried up,
the forests on seven seas are razed
no mysterious castle or a cage with a parrot,
not even a handful of berries to devour.
As no one tells the tale
the fiend needs no more
the tremendous makeup or his fiend's costume.
He need not steal the princess any more.

The fiend
gets up in the morning
adorns his horns with jasmine,
and then
till the next day, sits quietly
having nothing in particular to do. (Kambar 29)

The progressive passage of time has rendered the fiend useless in the scheme of things. He has no place in the contemporary times and has been substituted by the bulls and bears of the market or the robot of the scientific and technological world. The poem shows the gradual decline that takes place in the process of history from a happy stage into an increasing degree of artifice which is projected through the gradual decline

of the importance of the fiend and the change in the circumstances due to the growth and development of the civilized society. At the same time, the text implicitly emphasizes on the fact that the fiend has been preserved as a relic of the past and has not been completely eliminated from the scheme of things although it has no place in the contemporary times. This in turn shows the influence of the fiend on the present and the future thereby subtly suggesting the mutual coexistence of the fiend, the bulls and bears of the market and the robot. This aspect projects the need of integration of various contrary trends rather than the annihilation of any one entity or the domination of one over the other. The fiend's state is projected as:

His story has faded out,
and that, worries his heart.
Now he belongs to a different realm
and we to another province.
Between the two of us
Much water has flown in the river
we can no more make him ever grin.

Bordering on his realm
sprawls the snaky civilized world.
The bulls and bears of the market
take out an endless procession
headed by useless numskulls.

The robot seems far better than the fiend.
The fiend can't jump to the skies,
can't conduct the star wars,
can't rape the souls,
can't provoke the perversity. (Kambar 29)

The reading of the text makes a amply clear that in the contemporary times "Primitivism" or "Chronological Primitivism" cannot be upheld as absolute ideologies for advancements in the real relations of production or thought. However, indigenous cultures and their folklore do have their own importance in the scheme of things. It is also a misconception that indigenous cultures are not advanced in the fields of Economics or in Science and Technology. There are well proven and documented evidences

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which establish the fact that ancient cultures or civilizations were equally or even more advanced than the ones that are considered to be the most advanced or developed cultures or civilizations. In this context, Abrams writes:

A historical concept that is antithetic to chronological primitivism emerged in the seventeenth century and reached its height in the nineteenth century. This is the idea of progress: the doctrine that, by virtue of the development and exploitation of art, science and technology, and wisdom, the course of history represents an overall improvement in the life, morality, and happiness of human beings from early barbarity to the present stage of civilization; sometimes it is also claimed that this historical progress of humanity will continue indefinitely – possibly to end in a final stage of social, rational, and moral perfection. (170-171)

In the poem, “Progress” is represented by the bulls and bears of the market as well as the robot who successfully substitute the fiend as they are a product of the contemporary times and have come into existence by virtue of the development and exploitation of economy, art, science and technology and wisdom and help in improving the quality of life, morality and happiness of human beings from early barbarity to the present stage of civilization. An instance can be cited in the case of the robot from the text:

The robot seems far better than the fiend.
The fiend can't jump to the skies,
can't conduct the star wars, (Kambar 29)

Thus, although the poem makes a case for “Chronological Primitivism” but there is an “aporia”, an irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in the text, when it is mentioned that the robot is stronger than the fiend as it can jump to the skies and can also conduct star wars which the fiend can't. These lines in the poem undermine the foregrounded ideology of “Chronological Primitivism”. The next two lines of the same stanza acknowledges that the robot can rape the souls and can provoke the perversity which the fiend can't thereby making the irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in the text more pronounced. The text does not mention ostensibly that in the contemporary times both the robot

and the fiend are required to maintain growth and progress of the society, culture and nation. It never suggests explicitly that the solution to the problem is to tread the middle path and make both the robot and the fiend coexist harmoniously rather than choosing to make any one entity exist. The danger of making anyone exist, that is, either the fiend or the robot would mean that one has to sacrifice either progress or primitivism although each one has its own merits and demerits. The text ostensibly seems to be critical of indiscriminate progress but ends up subverting its logic as manifested in the logocentric language that is grounded on the “metaphysics of presence” (Abrams 226). Such an instance manifests an attempt to establish an absolute ground in presence and all implicit reliance on such a ground in using language are illusory. The consequence, as Derrida posits “is that we can never, in any instance of speech or writing, have a fixed and decidable present meaning. He says that the differential play (*jeu*) of language does produce the “effects” of decidable meanings in an utterance or text, but asserts that these effects are illusory” (226-227).

In the text, the robot is not only shown to be more powerful but also the product of an alien influence, that is, American influence which is seen to be pro-progress rather than pro-“Chronological Primitivism” as it is a new culture which emphasizes on Economics and Science and Technology for its growth and development. The influence of a foreign culture is seen skeptically as the robot is the outcome of that culture and it is shown to win the battle with the fiend showing that Science and Technology is the route to development thereby undermining the idea of “Chronological Primitivism” which is the manifested idea. The idea of “Progress” in the poem is the non-present meaning which is not present to the reader in its own positive identity. The idea of “Progress” is not strictly absent from the text the manifested idea of “Chronological Primitivism” is the result of a “self-effacing” trace which consists of the non-present idea of “Progress” and its difference from the manifested idea is the sole factor which invests the text with having a meaning in its own right. The text highlights it through this instance:

The other day, in a story told by the Americans,
it seems there was a furious battle
between him and the robot.
The robot beat the fiend black and blue.
And the fiend ran away to cover

and hid himself in the folktale.
The folk didn't let him alone.
Dragged him out,
made a beautiful frame,
and displayed him
on the walls of the museum.
Now he looks no more at the robot
or, even at the children.
For,
he says,
the children, after all,
are the off spring of the robot.
Aren't they? (Kambar 29-30)

This example projects the idea of "Progress" implicitly and the idea of "Chronological Primitivism" explicitly as the robot which represents the idea of "Progress" beats the fiend who represents the idea of "Chronological Primitivism" black and blue. It shows that although the text ostensibly foregrounds "Chronological Primitivism" but implicitly suggests that "Progress" has significance in the contemporary times and is fast gaining currency. The plight of the fiend in running for cover, being dragged out and then being framed in a beautiful frame to be displayed on the walls of the museum shows the need for modernity in the contemporary times but the preserving of the fiend as a museum relic shows the significance of tradition. Thus, the implicit idea does not project a dichotomy between man and machine but suggests the harnessing of the potential of the machines by man to benefit mankind. Moreover, it can be done when the past or the tradition can be taken into consideration for reaping the fruits of the present so the fiend is not discarded but maintained as a relic in the museum.

Deconstruction is merely to "situate" or "reinscribe" texts in a system of difference which shows the ultimate self-subversion of the effects to which they owe their seeming intelligibility (Abrams 228). This text situates or reinscribes itself in a system of *différance* thereby leading to the subversion of the projected idea or ideology of "Chronological Primitivism" which is wary of the mechanized progress and suggests the distant past to be an idyllic period from which the present derives

inspiration. The fact that the fiend has not been completely abandoned and has been preserved as a relic in the museum shows the inspiration that it provides to the present or the contemporary times. Finally, the idea that is projected is that the fiend and the robot should mutually coexist leading to *différance* or play of ideas by differing and deferring which in turn focusses on the multiplicity of ideas as embodied in the text and does not posit any one idea as the only idea which is to be foregrounded.

Chandrashekhar B. Kambar's "The Fiend of the Folktales" manifests the idea or ideology of "Chronological Primitivism" but a deconstructive reading of the text subverts the manifested idea or ideology leading to the foregrounding of the implicit idea, that is, of "Progress" which has been ostensibly shunned in the text thereby foregrounding the dichotomy between tradition and modernity or man and machine. The idea that is actually upheld although implicitly is the mutual coexistence of the fiend symbolizing tradition and the robot symbolizing modernity or progress as a culture cannot merely survive on its tradition and also needs progress to survive in the fast changing world. The integration of tradition and modernity is foregrounded rather than the dichotomy of tradition and modernity. In this fast paced world, man needs the help of machines to attain progress but at the same time man should not forget the traditional past which forms an integral part of his identity or his sense of belongingness thereby stressing on the need to integrate the polar opposites rather than foregrounding any one of the entities or giving a free way to any one of the entities.

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