

# 1

## Two Forms of the Word, the Spoken and Written Derrida, Pre-Platonic Writing West and Speaking India

A. Raghuramaraju

Department of Philosophy, The University of Hyderabad

Let me begin with a confession. Located within Indian academia it is difficult to get into the mainstream scholarship on Western philosophy in general and Jacques Derrida in particular. I therefore confine my discussion to his path-breaking essay, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (2005), except to deviate, though infrequently, by referring to his *Of Grammatology* (1976). Standing at the gateway to his scholarship I plan to operate at the border between inside and outside Derrida, the latter consisting of pre-Platonic philosophy and India that defies centres. In this paper I frame this key essay that first identified the pervasive problem of logocentrism surrounding Western metaphysics. This framing I undertake by distinguishing two forms of the word, the word as spoken and as written, the latter falling within and the former outside the frame. I do not discuss the difference between the spoken word versus the written word in *Indian* philosophy as discussed by T. R. V. Murti (1996) or the relation between Derrida and Classical Indian Philosophy as discussed by H. G. Coward (1991). I am, on the other hand, interested in distinguishing the difference between pre-Platonic speech as dialogue/ debate and post-Platonic speech as writing. In the second section following this discussion, I will attempt to understand Derrida outside this frame by bringing into discussion ideas and instances from India. For instance, I highlight the variance between the indomitability of centres in post-Plato philosophising in the West and the Indian one where we have innumerable centres, managing which is unwieldy if not a mess.

*Frame:* While accepting the Biblical claim about the ontology of the word (that in the beginning was the Word), it is important to examine the form and nature of the word. The claim about the ontological status of the word is important to understand better the Platonic intervention in the history of Western thought. I want to use two claims made in *Of Grammatology*, one by Nietzsche and other by Derrida himself. Though not explicated, Derrida cites, at the beginning of his first chapter of his *Of Grammatology*, Nietzsche who wrote, "Socrates, he who does not write" (1994: 6). This is an important statement, however one that Derrida did not pursue in this book. Instead he goes on to discuss Plato and Aristotle (1994: 11; 15); Rousseau; Saussure; and Levi-Strauss on the relation between speech and writing. The other claim made by Derrida is that Nietzsche is the last Platonist. I want to make use of both these statements and highlight how Plato

brought about an enormous change by doctrinizing thought that was in a *dialogical* form. This transformation of dialogue, which is a form of speech, into writing is radical. This reveals the variance, difference, opposition between philosophising before and after Plato. So there are two phases. Phase one has Socrates who does not write but participates in a form of speech that is debate or dialogue. Phase two, where open ended dialogue is compressed and frozen by the written word. I want to claim that Derrida's primary preoccupation is with the second phase. And I want to use the first phase as a frame to the second phase.

In discussing the relation between speech and writing Derrida discusses Rousseau, Saussure and Levi-Strauss. He says of Rousseau that for him writing is "nothing but the representation of speech; it is *bizarre* that one gives more care to the determining of the *image* than to the *object*" (Derrida 1994: 36). He goes on to point out that for Rousseau "people forget that they learn to speak before they learn to write and the natural sequence is reversed" (37).

However, this positive attitude to speech and critical attitude to writing changes in Rousseau's *Confessions*, where, Derrida writes, Rousseau, "tries to explain how he became a writer" by describing "the passage to writing as the restoration, by a certain absence and by a sort of calculated effacement, of presence disappointed of itself in speech" (1994: 142). In this work, says Derrida, "Rousseau is suspicious also of the illusion of full and present speech, of the illusion of presence within a speech believed to be transparent and innocent" (1994: 140). He urges us to reread the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. Having pointed out disappointments with speech, Rousseau, says Derrida, "considers writing as a dangerous-means, a menacing aid, the critical response to a situation of distress" (1994: 144). That is, "when speech fails to protect presence, writing becomes necessary.... This recourse is not only 'bizarre,' but dangerous. It is the addition of a technique, a sort of artificial and artful ruse to make speech present when it is actually absent. It is a violence done to the natural destiny of the language" (1994: 144).

The disappointment in the speech is further covered up by deploying the analogy of mother and wife. Rousseau claims that although there is no substitute for a mother's love, however, "it is better that the child should suck the breast of a healthy nurse rather than a petted mother" (Derrida: 1994: 145-146). Similarly, writing becomes a supplement to speech.<sup>1</sup> Thus claims Rousseau, "Therese [the wife is] ... needed [as] a successor to mamma" (Derrida 1994: 156-157).<sup>2</sup> Having explained the transformation from speech to writing in Rousseau, let us now turn to Derrida's discussion of Saussure.

---

<sup>1</sup>Rousseau uses the same argument in his *Social Contract* where he first postulated a state-of-nature that is desirable; having postulated this he then goes on to show how it is no more possible to retain this state and in the conclusion he comforts the reader by saying that leaving the state-of-nature where there is only a natural liberty is substantially compensated in the contracted civil society, by civil liberty.

<sup>2</sup>Here there is the simultaneous use of 'supplement' and 'successor' while explaining the process from speech to writing or nature to civilisation. There is a difference between these two expressions but they are used as synonyms. I do not know whether this is the problem with the authors or their translators.

Saussure, points out Derrida, privileges speech over writing (1994: 30-31); he says of writing that it is a “garment of perversion and debauchery, a dress of corruption and disguise, a festival mask that must be exorcised, that is to say warded off, by the good word” (1994: 35). While Derrida endorses Saussure’s denouement of ‘classical linguists’ about their blind prejudice towards writing (1994: 39), he, however, “challeng[es] in the very name of the arbitrariness of the sign, the Saussurian definition of writing as ‘image’—hence as natural symbol of language.” (1994: 45). He claims how Saussure was “never able to think that writing was truly an ‘image,’ a ‘figuration,’ a ‘representation,’ of the spoken word, a symbol” (1994: 45). Derrida concludes that despite his ‘intention or motivation’ Saussure inherited ‘an entire uncritical tradition’ (1994: 46). Having made this allegation he now turns to Levi-Strauss.

Levi-Strauss considered the “passage from speech to writing as a *leap*, as the instantaneous crossing of a line of discontinuity: passage from fully oral language, pure of all writing — *pure*, innocent — to a language appending to itself its graphic ‘representation’ as an accessory signifier of a new type, opening a technique of oppression” (1994: 120). He identifies the ‘second wave of mediation’ where Levi-Strauss seeks to “neutralize the frontier between peoples without and with writing; not with regard to the use of writing, but with regard to what is supposed to be deducible from it, with regard to their historicity or non-historicity.” (1994: 128). For Levi-Strauss, says Derrida, to “recognize writing in speech, that is to say difference and the absence of speech, is to begin to think the lure” (1994: 139).

The reason why I discussed Derrida’s treatment of the relation between speech and writing in the writings of Rousseau, Saussure and Levi-Strauss is to show that he is preoccupied with writing and as he rightly points out in the case of Levi-Strauss, the “writing in speech” (1994: 139). In contrast, I highlight a mode of speech in the form of debate or dialogue in Plato. That is, despite the claims of those inside the debate, it remains ‘open’ as there exists no provision to close it off. Thought in a dialogical form was far more open with multiple interventions and interpretations. It is devoid of permanent centre. There may be a temporary winner in the dialogue but even this subsequently is open to further contestations, returns, revisits. In contrast, in the dialogue that is *written* by Plato, Socrates is a winner once for all. To reiterate, the scene would be different if the dialogue is *not* written down, it would have remained open despite claims by several. Before this change, the dialogue not only had several contestants but was available for *subsequent* contestations. This defies the possibility of a centre. That is, thought, not only had simultaneous centres contesting each other but also openings into the future.

All this changed because of Plato’s radical act of writing down the open-ended dialogue, in a frozen, written form. The written as a presence closed forever all these openings, each of which had innumerable possibilities. So, there is a subtle but significant difference between *the written as a presence* and its relation to possibilities and *the spoken as a presence* and its relation to possibilities. My contention is that there is a need to distinguish between the word in the spoken form and the word in the written form in order to identify the purview of logocentrism to understand this concept better.

This is important because the word is available in both forms. Derrida's reference, to the theories that he is critiquing as contesting logocentrism, or presencing, are largely where word is in the *written* form. In highlighting the continuity between Socrates and Plato and critiquing his metaphysics as laying the foundation for logocentrism we often do not notice the underlying changes in the format, namely, from dialogue to doctrine, or more specifically dialogues presented in a doctrine form. The question that is important is that what in Plato makes him the first metaphysician. Definitely not the content as he is only reporting, in a systematic manner the 'live' dialogues. Socrates and others in the dialogues spoke their views. In none of the dialogues, is there Plato. So, how does he become the first metaphysician in a tradition of which Nietzsche is the last one? The answer to this lies in distinguishing between the spoken word as a presence and the written word also as a presence. Plato characterised the latter as an indomitable presence. The claim that I am making is derived from Nietzsche's statement about Socrates and Derrida's claim about Nietzsche.

This new presencing that scuttled the open-endedness is then consolidated. In this move towards consolidation, Plato presented, to use a phrase that I used elsewhere in referring to Adi Samkara, a refrigerated account of thought. In this new format, Socrates claims that the human being's task is to passively and merely discover the already existing, everlasting and immutable forms. It is allowed to be contested within the free play but eventually lost, thus confirming and vindicating Socrates' claim. Instead of this claim being put to simultaneous (in the form of others contesting the point in the course of the debate within Socrates), and sequential (in the form of others contesting it *later*) the changed format allows this claim to be contested within the free play within the dialogue and then contested from outside by subsequent thinkers like Aristotle. Unlike in the pre-frozen, pre-doctrinaire situation, where thought is not closed, in the -frozen situation, one is forced to contest a closed or a final view. The temporality that underlies this frozen scene is where one has, one necessarily has to have, a closed and official position that you contest not from within but necessarily from the outside. By the logic of the position, one is left with contesting the existing centre and forced to institute another centre. Derrida brilliantly identifies this last point. This initial move by Plato forms the frame; without recalling this one cannot understand the nature and boundary of Derrida. Having set the frame let me in the following provide background to Derrida to highlight the importance of his essay.

*Scene one:* Derrida thus inhabits the inside of the frame, one of *writing*, outside of which lies not mere speech but a particular form of it, namely, debate or dialogue. In scene One, Plato and Plato's Socrates maintained that there is a divine order independent of human beings. The only task of human beings is to merely and passively discover that which is already there. Leo Strauss succinctly captures this when he says that traditional natural law which is "primarily and mainly an objective rule 'rule and measure', a binding order prior to, and independent of, the human will..." (1966: vii-viii). This leaves very little, in fact almost nothing, for human freedom and creativity. Subsequently, there have been attempts by Aristotle and Christianity to offer alternative but contesting centres. Despite differences, all of them in varying degrees, sought to privilege the transcendental reality. This convergence to locate centres came under the scanner of modern philosophy.

*Scene two:* A modern philosopher like Descartes sought to reject outright the transcendental that became a breeding ground for instituting centres.

Descartes formulated a new logic in his *Discourse on Method*, a logic of exclusion that sought to disinherit everything from the pre-modern including the classical transcendental. He sets out his normative scale, which is *cogito*, reason and certainty, and embarks on excluding, at the outset, others. These are: childhood (as it is the domain governed by appetite and teachers rather than reason, the latter he identifies as the domain of adults (1985: 117); language (1985: 113); history (for him the past is like travel, which takes us away from the present), oratory; poetry (poetry is the ‘gift of mind rather than fruits of study’ 1985: 114); moral writings of pagans (1985: 114); customs; evolutionary growth of societies (he rejects gradual growth of societies 1985: 116); he even rejects classical logic and mathematics as they are ‘mixed up with’ all sorts of things (1985: 119-120). The reality that modernity instituted is immanent. These moves give us a general idea of the project of disinheriting and excluding all those emerging from the pre-modern from the domain of modernity.

*Scene three:* Subsequent to modern philosophies’ attempt to disinherit the pre-modern, including transcendental from the classical, logical positivist found that ordinary language is full of non-referential words and they sought to eliminate metaphysical words, having earlier eliminated metaphysics, through the method of verification principle. This principle accepted only two kinds of statements, namely, analytical and synthetic statements. They proposed not only establishing the relation between word and object, but also insisting that a word refers to only or some specific set of objects. This is the route towards the project of artificial intelligence and passwords culture. When the anti-positivism in humanities was decentred through deconstruction, it surreptitiously re-camped in a different form in the departments of computer science and occupied our pockets in the form of mobile phones thus forming another centre. So, logical positivism is everywhere but we do not see it.

It is this new and disguised form of authority whose non-visibility that Derrida seems to highlight. This is not a theological or political authority that you know and can suffer, endure or even confront. This is a new form of oppression that is invisible. Foucault highlights one aspect of this in his work on power/knowledge. One way to understand Foucault’s thesis of how knowledge generated power is through the following example. Take an example of a village that had no school. And the most of the villagers will not be called illiterates. Imagine a new school in this village. Now this creates a new problem, that is, those who go to the school will be literates but designating those who don’t will pose a problem. It is not proper to call them illiterates; still, if we call them pre-literates then this new designation is temporally post to the arrival of literacy, but the designation is employed retrospectively. This retrospective designation, Foucault would call, is thrust on the people by arrival of literacy. This is how knowledge generates power and operated on people.

Derrida takes the discussion to the very site of logic and language, what he calls as logocentrism. A discussion of Derrida’s legacy without recalling the legacy that he inherited will fail to bring down his radical project that goes beyond Nietzsche who

declared that God is dead. So there are two phases of deconstruction. Phase one, the demolition of the fort of centre; phase two, of discourse as bricolage. The latter takes us back into the discourse that existed with Socrates.

Let me now discuss the major themes and claims in the Derrida's essay. Let me begin with structure. Derrida makes a subtle but a serious distinction between structure and centre and claims that the centre is more important than structure. This in a way lays the foundation for the demolition of structuralism. He is alerting us to the centre of the problem, or its opposite, its virtue is not in the structure but in the centre. If you concentrate, congregate or rally around the structure to demolish it then you are indulging in a negotiation with the surface that invariably fails or worse, may become counterproductive.

The centre of the structure, Derrida will argue, "permits the free play of its elements inside the total form" (2005: 352) As already pointed out above in the case of Plato, the centre of the structure controls but does allow free play between or amongst its elements, however, only inside the total form. Having conceded this much, thus making a right assessment of the strength and nature of what he is critiquing, Derrida goes on to make a big claim that a structure without a centre is 'unthinkable': "And even today the notion of structure lacking any centre represents the unthinkable itself" (2005: 352) He is thus claiming that the centre is more central than the overall structure. He says, "Thus it has always been thought that the centre, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality." (2005: 352) The important point that is to be noted here is, centre is not a part of structure, on the contrary, it is the centre that is unique, and governs the structure. So, structure does not govern its centre rather it is the centre that governs the structure.

At this moment he makes another interesting move, by employing a psychological move: anxiety. He says,

... on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were at stake in the game from the outset. And again on the basis of what we call the centre (and which, because it can be either inside or outside, can also indifferently be called the origin or end, *arche* or *telos*), repetitions, substitutions, transformations, and permutations are always *taken* from the history of the meaning [*sens*] — that is, in a word, a history — whose origin may always be reawakened or whose end may always be anticipated in the form of presence (2005: 252-253).

Let us identify various ideas that are introduced, relations established, connections drawn, and conclusions arrived at. First, there is an anxiety. This anxiety is caused by the reader's unease with the situation and her or his inability to identify the problem that causes this anxiety. Similar to that of Freudian repression, the inability lies in the non-availability of the problem in a centralised mode. Just when one wants to complain that there is a 'problem' of rigidity supposedly imposed by the centre, one is confronted by the phenomena of free play that is allowed by the same centre. The presence of free play thus is an antidote to the complaint of rigidity. The range of free play consists of

repetitions, substitutions, transformations and permutations in the history of meaning. All these do not enable one to make a clear and total complaint about the cause of anxiety around the idea of the centre and structure. In a sense, these aspects of free play camouflage the politics of the centre. This camouflage does not enable the reader to easily address, or even identify, the problem. This generates the anxiety.

The deceptive variety that camouflages the centre makes a large claim that prevents one from seeing the centre's politics in Derrida's work when he introduces two other variables, namely, origin and telos. That the centre is not an artefact but has been present from the beginning and is therefore either natural or divine; and the tyranny of, or difficulties with, the centre have to be tolerated as they have a teleology. So the presencing by the centre through these strategies is not only from the inside but also from the outside. Inside can be in the beginning: there was the word or God, a transcendental being created the immanent world. Elucidating the different dimensions of the centre Derrida says,

the entire history of the concept of structure, before the rupture of which we are speaking, must be thought of as a series of substitutions of centre for centre, as a linked chain of determinations of the centre. Successively, and in a regulated fashion, the centre receives different forms or names. The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphysics and metonymies (2005: 353).

So, to reiterate, the centre is more central than the structure, thus there is a need to pay attention to centre rather than mere structure; each centre of a structure does permit free play of its elements however, inside the total form. Metaphysics managed these different presences through a series of camouflages is the root cause of anxiety.

Disclosing these camouflages and identifying the root of the problem as lying not with structure but with centre explains the movements of the centre or centres. Derrida first declares that we must realise that 'there was no centre'; centre 'should not be thought in the form of a being-present'; 'centre had no natural locus, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions come into play'. Thus, decentred or deconstructed, 'in the absence of a centre or origin, everything becomes discourse' Explaining the consequences of this he writes, when

... everything become discourse ... a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of difference. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely (2005: 354).

Tracing the beginning of this rupture he concedes that it

would be somewhat naive to refer to an event, a doctrine, or an author in order to designate this occurrence. It is no doubt part of the totality of an era, our own, but still it has always already begun to proclaim itself and begun to work (2005: 354).



He says probably the beginning are there in

Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics, the critique of the concepts of Being and truth, for which were substituted the concept of play, interpretation, and sign (sign without present truth); the Freudian critique of self-presence, that is, the critique of consciousness, of the subject, of self-identity and of self-proximity or self-possession; and, more radically, the Heideggerian destruction of metaphysics, of onto-theology, of the determination of being as presence (2005: 354).

Identifying the nature of this line of decentring and de-presenting, he points out:

But all these destructive discourses and all their analogues are trapped in a kind of circle. This circle is unique. It describes the form of the relation between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics (2005: 354).

I suggest that there is a need to distinguish two stages of the Derrida essay: the diagnostic and recommendatory. That is, the essay until now works towards brilliantly and ingeniously diagnosing the problem. Having accomplished this task successfully, Derrida now embarks on making recommendations for overcoming this problem. I am of the opinion that he falters here; he uses the mood belonging to the diagnosis as a bricolage, even at the second stage. In other words, already available and ready-made use of the earlier mood does not sit well to accomplishing the task that requires a different mood. Let me elaborate this by carefully identifying the following moves from his recommendations. I argue that not distinguishing these two stages, and not reading through the classification of the cluster of recommendations has serious implications to those who inhabit his legacy in different disciplines and cultures.

First, he says, "If one erases the radical difference between signifier and signified, it is the word 'signifier' itself which must be abandoned as a metaphysical concept." (2005: 355) What is important in this conditional statement is the idea of 'erasing': erasing the radical difference between signifier and signified. If this happens, Derrida says, then it is the word signifier itself that ought to be abandoned as a metaphysical concept. There is a difference between abandoning the word signifier and abandoning it as a metaphysical concept. If it is the former, then it can lapse into chaos or end up in what Umberto Eco calls 'overinterpretation'. However, if it is the latter then this consequence need not follow. Alternatively, Derrida is suggesting in this sentence the need to reject the relation between signifier and signified as rigid and authoritative, and yet save the project from relapsing into the predicament of 'anything goes' or chaos. That is, he is rejecting signifier as a metaphysical concept.

Second, he introduces the idea of 'erasure', and distinguishes 'two heterogeneous ways of erasing the difference between the signifier and the signified'. The classical way that 'consist in reducing or deriving the signifier' that is, 'ultimately in submitting the sign to thought'. He proposes another way, which 'consist[s] in putting into question the system in which the preceding reduction functioned' (2005: 355). That is, Derrida proposes an undermining of the very structure that he excavated, and which is operated by the centre. Illustrating how this is executed by Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger he says that unlike the classical practice where the ones who destroyed the predecessor centre, congregate and thereby consolidate another centre, which becomes another oppressor. This is



exactly like one replacing the other . In contrast, these destroyers

destroy each other reciprocally — for example, Heidegger regarding Nietzsche, with as much lucidity and rigor as bad faith and misconstruction, as the last metaphysician, the last “Platonist”. One could do the same for Heidegger himself, for Freud, and for a number of others. And today no exercise is more widespread (2005: 356).

So there is a difference between what happened and what he proposes ought to happen; there is a diagnosis and a recommendation. If we do not read the recommendation with the Derrida mood of diagnosis, we tend to highlight the words like erasure, and do not realise that he is referring to erasing the metaphysical concept, and not erasure per se. For instance, as pointed out earlier, Derrida should not reject the relation between signifier and signified in the pre-metaphysical, pre-Platonic and Socratic dialogical discourse (that is governed by openness between and amongst various points that are in dialogue and in debate). These debates are not closed forever. Derrida is not rejecting any relation between signifier and signified but only rejecting this relation as absolute and total, and he concedes this relation as a functional relation. That is, destroying each other should not be taken as total destruction but rather as their destruction as absolutes. In other words, there is a need to distinguish reading them in isolation or as absolutes and reading them in conjunction with other concepts. If this is not done then there is a real danger where we receive the legacy of Derrida in different cultures exactly like the way that is repudiated by him, namely, the classical way where he himself becomes another centre.

At the end of the essay Derrida distinguishes two ‘interpretations of interpretations, of structure, of sign, of play’. One “seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile” (2005: 369). This is something like a relay race, where players change but not the stick that is passed from one to the other. The hand that hands over the stick to the next one is withdrawn but only after ensuring the successful continuation of race. Derrida is cautioning us not to be deceived by the discontinuity of the players but instead pay attention to the achieved continuity in the play. It is the continuing presencing that enables the race to progress through the stick where several players are used.

In contrast, the second mode of interpretation, Derrida goes to explain, “is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism” goes beyond the dream of ‘full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play” (2005: 369-370).<sup>3</sup> Derrida acknowledges that Nietzsche showed the way to this kind of interpretation of interpretation.

Let me now make some general comments on this path-breaking essay. One, the essay while highlighting the centrality of the centre and unravelling the process of replacing one centre by another, focussed on one aspect of this trajectory. That is, a linear trajectory

---

<sup>3</sup>I have in another place discussed this obsession with origin and the end of the game while discussing the metaphysic of Vaddera Chandidas.

in the history of Western metaphysics: Nietzsche to Freud to Heidegger. Derrida fails to focus on another kind where there is a more active negotiation that borders on contesting or rejecting simultaneously each other. That is, he fails to account for the competing centres during Nietzsche or during Freud. Rather he seems to take each of these thinkers as monolithic. Thus in the case of Socrates prior to Plato, where Socrates' ideas are contesting and contested. This is the possibility of dialogue. It simultaneity decentres the impact of the centre. This is the format of the debate where two or more speakers and their ideas actively engage and contest each other. More importantly it remains open-ended. In the process, the truth is continuously negotiated through contestation. This simultaneous contestation of the thinkers eludes Derrida's attention. Having framed Derrida's concern within the written and outside the speech, and raised some critical points let me in the next section discuss a theme that falls outside the frame discussed above, namely themes from India.

## II

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida quotes Rousseau who contrasted Orientals from French, English and German:

*'Our [French, English, German] tongues are better suited to writing than speaking, and there is more pleasure in reading us than in listening to us. Oriental tongues, on the other hand, lose their life and warmth when they are written. The words do not convey the meaning: all the effectiveness is in the tone of voice [accents]. Judging the genius of the Orientals from their books is like painting a man's portrait from his corps (in Derrida 1994: 226, italics Derrida's).*

So the Orient can fall outside the frame of those excel in writing, and according to the same argument, those who do not write do not have a history. The people of the Orient are those who speak and not write. Before I discuss those who speak but do not write, I propose that pre-Platonic thought was expressed in speaking, as debate or dialogue, which includes notably, Socrates and other prominent philosophers. They are thus in the company of the Indians. (I have elsewhere argued, against Akeel Bilgrami, that Gandhi is in the company of Christ and Socrates, who are from outside India. 2013.)

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak finds Derrida a better philosopher to launch her postcolonial critique. This choice of Pre-modern's differs from Edward Said's who in his *Orientalism* uses Foucault to launch his critique of Orientalism, particularly through Foucault's thesis on power/knowledge. Said admits at the outset that he "found it useful ... to employ ... Michel Foucault's notion of a discourse, as described by him in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and in *Discipline and Punish*, to identify Orientalism" (1979: 9). Spivak, though not directly referring to Said's use of Foucault, prefers Derrida as he is "less dangerous when understood than first world intellectuals masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves.". Spivak and Said are both inheritors of specific legacies – Foucauldian and Derridean poststructuralism – as they set about constructing postcolonial thought.

Let me now discuss the variance in the use of Derrida in the West and 'outside' it. I want to make a *bricolage* use of the legacy that Derrida inherits in order to save the

danger of Derrida's legacy in different cultures from relapsing into the predicament of the engineer. According to Derrida, for Levi-Strauss, *bricoleur* is someone who uses "the means at hand," that is, the

instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those who are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adopt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous — and so forth (2005: 360).

Derrida goes on to argue that if "one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*" (2005: 360).

That is, there is a possibility where we in India can use Derrida's writings as a *bricoleur*. Giving the nature and limitations of Derrida who operates within the written and not with the spoken, this use of Derrida in India will leave many aspects, particularly those that fall outside the written, outside his purview. So, when using him to liberate ourselves we need to be critically conscious of both these, namely, use him as a *bricoleur* and be conscious about the limitations that surround his scholarship. Here let me bring into the discussion three instances that provide a counter to Derrida who relentlessly sought to dismantle Western logocentrism.

One, there is a difference between deconstructing a centre and deconstructing an unwieldy phenomenon. In India today we also have a new phenomenon that is not a centre but something that is messy and unwieldy. This is a situation where you do not have rules but precedents. And decentres unmindfully are in the belief that they are defying rules. Indian society, despite several attempts to the contrary, largely remains less centred. Let me explain. I am not saying that there are no centres in India, there are but there remain large areas that remain outside the centre. That is, unlike in the West where there are clearly laid out centres and those who oppose, do so from the outside. In India on the other hand, there are not only many centres but also large domain of reality that falls outside the centres.

Unlike in the West, where modernity as a centre dismantled the pre-modern and removed it from the social domain, in India, pre-modern not only coexists with the modern, thus defying the modern canon but also posing a series of problems to this canon, and thereby decentering it. Though not in respect of centralised power, but in respect of the sheer volume and plural powers, the pre-modern is more in comparison to the modern in India. Modern cities in India are extensions of pre-modern villages; pre-modern voters sustain the success of democracy in India. (I have discussed this in my forthcoming work). Thus, the reality *outside* the centre is larger, though perhaps less powerful than what is inside the centre.

This voluminous pre-modern that lies outside the modern, i.e., unprocessed by modernity, made it possible for the rise of right-wing Indian politics, and precedes their

corresponding rise in the recent election in US. While India may lag behind America in modernity's success, with regard to the pre-modern, America lags behind India.

My second point proceeds from an autobiographical moment. I was invited some years ago to a seminar in Delhi organised by the Max Muller Bhavan. A participant from Germany told me about her wonderful trip to Punjab. She told me that she particularly found a sweet drink, yogurt (*lassi*), very tasty. She asked me to explain how it was made. I managed to tell her whatever I knew. I elaborated rather foolishly, and by way of compensating for my ignorance, that in India where they have to make large quantities of *lassi*, they use washing machines to make it. She was shocked. I tried to explain to her that they use brand-new machines to make the *lassi*! I recall this rather unpleasant incident to show that the Indian psyche is not only capable of following the manuals but also making use of that which is outside the manual. It is this outside of the manual, outside the centre that can pose some new and interesting questions to Derridas' radical attempt at decentring and deconstructing.<sup>4</sup>

Three, I bring into discussion Akeel Bilgrami's argument around Gandhi as an exemplar. This I do to bolster my argument about the non-written word. Bilgrami (2006) identifies the whole of Western morality as subscribing to rules and principles. In contrast to moral principles he finds an alternative, namely, moral *examples* who are more open-ended. In this context, he proposes Gandhi as proposing not a moral principle like in Western moral thinking, but as embodying an exemplar. (For a critique of Bilgrami for not considering Socrates and Christ as exemplars along with or before Gandhi, see my 2013).

I highlighted these three instances that fall outside the word as written, as not only to positively frame Derrida's logocentrism and presences but also to show the borders and limitation of his ingenious attempt to un-envelope the pervasive phenomena of Western metaphysics. Without this framing there is a problem of totalising the extent of this pervasive phenomena that might distort Derrida.

This brings us to the task of identifying the nature of Derrida's legacy for India. One, given the presence of large areas that do not have centres, a project like Derrida that operated against the centre as its goal post, it may not be useful or even proper to use him directly in India as seems to be the practice in liberal arts and social sciences disciplines in India. Ajay Skaria and Aishwary Kumar's use of post-modern theories to understand Gandhi and Ambedkar, respectively, are a few recent examples in this direction. This will add to the present practice in India, which is similar to that of making PDF files of a non-word document (that is different from PDF files of word document in use within the Western academics) or wanting to lay tiles in a muddy soil. It is equally true,

---

<sup>4</sup>At a different level there are attempts in the modern times where there have been radical moves to decentre interpretations. For instance, there have been several interpretations of Bhagad Gita as a text that positively promotes violence as Lord Krishna asks and instigates a reluctant Arjuna to fight war. This continued in the modern period particularly in the interpretation of Balagangadhara Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi's political Guru. Gandhi repudiated this entire hermeneutical tradition beginning from the classical times by claiming with textual evident that the text out rightly rejects violence and positively promotes non-violence. (See Raghuramraju 2016).

and pathetically so, that modern India has not produced good modern philosophical theories that are available readymade which can theorise modern Indian texts and social institutions and practices. Here it may be pointed out that modern India is complex as it contains the combination of a huge and voluminous pre-modern simultaneously existing with the modern. Theorising this strange and unique combination is indeed an arduous task. To come back to the lack of modern philosophical theories, this understandably, makes those from India to look at those like Derrida and his philosophy as a useful way to theorise and understand the Indian themes. I have argued elsewhere that this modern absence is the reason for Indians using theories from the West, rather than colonialism as held by many. (2009). That is, using the outside not because of colonialism but because of lack of internal resources. I have elsewhere argued the difference within the use of the outside by Indians like Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi. That is, outsider not only as an oppressor but on the contrary as an enabler (Raghuramraju, forthcoming). So one is stuck with lack and mismatch. The mismatch does not justify using Derrida as a *bricolage*, as bricolage makes sense against the overarching and oppressive presence of centres, which India seems to be lacking.

However, though not directly but indirectly, those like Derrida will be immensely useful to warn those from India against the dangers of allowing the India scene that seems to lack strong centres to become one in future. This will be a very good caution to circumvent the dangers in future. That is, the Western experience and the pervasive logocentrism can help Indians to avoid these possible developments. This demands a thorough understanding of Western philosophy that includes Derrida. This, at least in some cases, should be preceded by the understanding of Indian society and texts. Otherwise this can lead to more confusion.

Two, Derrida's legacy can be of paramount importance in understanding the modern institutions that India inherited both through and outside colonialism. Some of this was alluded to by Spivak. In this context one can also understand the complex and mutually manipulative relations in India between modern and traditional institutions, particularly, the way in which the latter have sought to reconfigure their nature and territory. Three, given the lack of modern philosophies in India, we can make a selective, reflective and judicious but not *bricolage* use of his deconstruction to understand better some centres and some deceptive and nascent centres in India. Four, we can understand better the relation between two forms of the word, the written and the spoken; the organised social institutions and unorganised, yet powerful and oppressive social institutions and practices.

Lastly, while Derrida's legacy may not directly find place in India, however, this is confined to his preoccupation that consists of his critique of logocentrism. Outside this negative domain, and with regard to those aspects that fall outside the logocentrism, that is in his positive programme, Indian texts and realities are nearer to him. So he belongs to India in this other and positive side. He might find a text like *The Mahabharata* with its polyphonic character less logocentric, and the centredless unwieldy and often messy Indian realities and practices, less oppressive. Or alternatively, these from India,

might make him see, at least relatively, advantages in logocentrism that he ingeniously unearthed and relentlessly sought to dismantle. This other side, the positive side to Derrida might get highlighted if you locate him within India, given the fact that located within the West naturally seems to have bolstered the negative side, that is, his critique of logocentrism.

I began by distinguishing two aspects of the word, the spoken and written; located Derrida's concern in his path-breaking essay in the transformation of the spoken in the form of open-ended dialogue into the written in Plato; also identified the contribution to this in the form of modernity and logical positivism. I discussed key ideas of his essay by distinguishing the diagnosis part from the recommendatory one. In the second section I used Rousseau's classification between those who speak and those who write, and discussed instances from those who are on the 'outside'. In the end I have identified the possible ways of inheriting Derrida in India and in other disciplines like liberal arts and social sciences.

## References

- Bilgrami, Akeel. 2006. 'Gandhi's Integrity: The Philosophy Behind the Politics,' in *Debating Gandhi: A Reader*, edited by A. Raghuramaraju, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 248-266.
- Coward, Harald, G. 1991. 'Speech Versus Writing in Derrida and Bhartrhari', *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 41, No. 21, pp. 141-162.
- Descartes, R. 1985. 'Discourse on Method', *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. 1, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, pp. 111-51, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1994. (first published in English in 1974), *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2005. (first published in 1967) 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, translated with an introduction and additional notes by Alan Bass, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 351-370.
- Murti, T. R.V. 1996 (first published in 1983). 'The Philosophy of Language in the Indian Context', in *Studies in Indian Thought: Collected Papers of Prof. T. R. V. Murti*, edited by Harold G. Coward, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, pp. 357-376.
- Raghuramaraju, A. 2009. *Enduring Colonialism: Classical Presences and Modern Absences in Indian Philosophy*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2013. 'Gandhi to Western Moral Philosophy', in *Philosophy and India: Ancestors, Outsiders and Predecessors*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press,
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2016. 'The Ethics in M. K. Gandhi: Truth and Non-violence' in *Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Ethics*, edited by Shyam Ranganathan, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, pp. 341-356.
- \_\_\_\_\_. forthcoming 2017. *Modern Frames and Pre-modern Themes in Indian Philosophy: Border, Self and the Other*, London, New Delhi, Routledge.
- Rousseau, J. J. 1952. *The Social Contract and Discourse*, London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., Originally written in 1762.
- Said, Edward. 1979. *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books.
- Spivak, Gayatri (1988). 'Can the Subaltern Speak' in Carl Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg edited *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Strauss, Leo. 1966. *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Genesis*, Chicago: The Chicago University Press.