Chapter 3

Derrida’s Différance and Nagarjuna’s Sunyata

This chapter focuses on the comparative study of the highly influential concept of Jacques Derrida’s *Différance* and Nagarjuna’s *Sunyata*. At the outset it is already critical to point out that the idea of a comparison in this context is an intense challenge, as its basis is a kind of refusal, a deferral which is not an absence what Derrida calls it as *Différance*, Nagarjuna called it as *Sunyata* nearly two millennia earlier. The comparative study of Derrida’s *Différance* specifically with Nagarjuna’s interpretation of *Sunyata* would result in an appreciation of the complexity and diversity of what is too often lumped into a single package labelled ‘Indian Thought’.

This kind of comparative treatment of Derrida and Nagarjuna in this research work would encourage readers unfamiliar with ‘Indian Thought’ to explore the long and nuanced history of ideas it entails and would further help in establishing the pioneering thoughts of Nagarjuna, which was later found in Derrida, thus aiding the researcher’s search for Derrida’s intellectual forefather in reading Derridean deconstruction against the backdrop of Nagarjuna’s philosophy. But before embarking on the comparative study of the key concepts of Derrida and Nagarjuna, it is essential to define what *Différance* is and what is *Sunyata*?
Without a proper understanding of these two terms it is very difficult to decipher the thought processes of these two great thinkers of the world, whose concepts are very elusive to the perception, if one reads them without any background knowledge.

**Différance**

Defining Derrida’s neologisms such as *Différance* is no mean task. It is a term loaded with multiple meanings. It is Derrida’s play with the words; his fascination with words leads him to haul multiple meanings even in ordinary words which normally don’t lend themselves to the play. Alan Boss who has translated Jacques Derrida’s *Writing and Difference* in his introduction has given an adequate definition of *Différance*. To Alan Boss,

> Its meanings are too multiple to be explained here fully, but we may note briefly that the word combines in neither active nor the passive voice the coincidence of meanings in the verb différer: to differ (in space) and to defer (to put off in time, to postpone presence). Thus, it does not function simply either as différence (difference) or as *Différance* in the usual sense (deferral), and plays on the meanings at once. (Xvii- xviii)

*Différance* is one of the basic components with which Derrida sets out to work on his philosophy of Deconstruction. In his works he has endeavoured to deconstruct all notions of self-presence or self-identity which have arisen as
correlates to the dominant category in the episteme of Western culture: namely, being. The basic strategy by which Derrida carries out his project of critical deconstruction is to undermine all notions of self-identity through the logic of *Différance*. That is to say, Derrida endeavours to demonstrate how any category of presence, being or identity can be deconstructed into a play of differences. Derrida explicates what *Différance* is in his book entitled Positions. For him, “*Différance* is the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other.” (27)

This key term in Derrida’s ever-shifting lexicon of technical terms, is a combination of two French verbs: “to differ” and “to defer.” On the one side, *Différance* indicates “to differ” (diff’erer), in the sense that no sign can be simply identical with itself, but instead disseminates into a chain of differences. On the other side, *Différance* indicates “to defer” (diff'erer), in the sense that the meaning of a sign is always deferred by intervals of spacing and temporalising so as to be put off indefinitely.

The idea of *Différance* as “difference/deferral” thus functions to prevent conceptual closure or reduction to an ultimate meaning. In other words, *Différance* is a critical deconstruction of the “transcendental signified”; each “signified” is revealed as an irreducible play of floating signifiers so that any given sign empties out into the whole network of differential relations.
Derrida’s differential logic has here been especially influenced by the
semiology of Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*, which
asserts: “in language there are only differences without positive terms.”(120) by
playing on the meanings, Derrida takes Saussure’s notion of the linguistic sign a
step further. Saussure emphasized the way in which we make sense of signifiers
based on their difference from other signifiers (“cat” differs from “pat,” “cap,”
“hat,” and so on--this is how we process language). The emphasis above is on
phonetic differentiation. In order to understand the concept one can take the most
straightforward example: how does one define the word “difficult”? One looks it
up in the dictionary, which, unfortunately, is not full of all sorts of wonderful
actual signifieds, but just provides one with a list of other possible signifiers:
“complicated,” “hard,” “challenging,” and soon.

No matter how hard one tries, one can never make the signified present;
one is caught in an endless chain of signifiers leading toward signifieds that are in
themselves signifiers of other signifieds, and so on. Therefore, the condition of
language itself is *Différance*: the difference of words from one another and the
endless deferral of what they mean, in the sense of a fully present signified.

Thus *Différance* is a word that Derrida created to capture the spirit of the
‘play’ he is trying to express. Perhaps it is not fair to refer to it as a word - it ‘is’ a
function, a force, as much as anything else. The ‘a’ is an inaudible error.
*Différance* sounds just like différence - they are indistinguishable unless one passes through a text. *Différance*, he explains, is a useful term, an efficacious tool which is both strategic and adventurous. As pointed out earlier, it contains both the notions of ‘to differ’, “to be not identical, to be other, discernable” - otherwise referred as ‘spacing’; and ‘to defer’. In other words, not only does *Différance* connote both differing and deferring, it is felt in both space and time, insinuated in everything but not exactly consisting in anything.

The elements of signification function due not to the compact force of their nuclei but rather to the network of oppositions that distinguishes them, and then relates them to one another. In other words, a signified-thing or concept-is never present in and of itself and, in language; there are only differences; the relations of words to each other. Like a beginning less web where everything is connected to every other thing, where there are no ‘things’ apart from that interdependence, so, Derrida writes, that which is written as *Différance* can be the playing movement of that which produces these differences, these effects of difference. He designates it as the movement according to which any system of referral is constituted as a weave of differences.

Having situated *Différance* within this weave of differences, Derrida asks a crucial question: what differs? Who differs? What is *Différance*? By way of an answer, he questions the very notion of conscious presence, and the privilege
granted to the present which are connoted by the *what* and the *who*. In other words, he extends the horizon of his discussion of *Différance* to include more than language and embrace ontological questioning as well. Characterizing the understanding of being that precedes him as comprehending only consciousness, or self-presence, he explains that it is actually only one mode or effect of being and does not constitute it in its entirety.

Derrida posits *Différance* as a referring/deferring to being to replace ‘presence’ - a referring/deferring which no longer tolerates the opposition of activity and passivity or that of cause and effect, etc- in other words, in *Différance* there are no absolute identities, none of the absolute dualities such as that of presence and absence, which characterize ‘presence’. Presence in western metaphysics leads to what Derrida characterises as logocentrism.

For Derrida all the terms related to fundamentals in western metaphysics depend upon the notion of constant presence. Thus, the history of metaphysics rests upon the false premise that words refer to meanings present in their utterance. The premise is false because meaning is created through a play of differences between signifier and signified: a sign has no independent meaning for it always contains traces of the other, absent signs, whether spoken or written. The present itself, e.g., always contains traces of what it is not. In other words, the ‘metaphysics of presence’ is the idea of an overarching meaning present in
language and thought on which ordinary speech and the constructs of thought depend. Hence, epistemological systems are forms of presence in so far as processes of thought are contingent upon an overall presence that determines the legitimacy of meaning within the construction of the substance of thought, including the structure of the thought itself. Therefore, rationalism claims to have access to knowledge and truth by virtue of the presupposition of logos as presence.

Derrida states the following with regard to the metaphysical presence in his masterpiece *Of Grammatology*:

All the metaphysical determinations of truth… are more or less immediately inseparable from the instance of the logos, or of a reason thought within the lineage of the logos, in whatever sense it could be understood: in the pre-Socratic sense or the philosophical sense, in the sense of God’s infinite understanding or in the anthropological sense, in the pre-Hegelian or the post-Hegelian sense. (21)

Thus, the presence of substance, essence and existence are supported by Logocentrism. Therefore, the Derridean notion of the metaphysics of presence can be considered as the overarching ‘meta’ in all narratives within rationalistic epistemology since Rationalism presupposes the presence of logos to which rationalistic truth claims refer. The project of critical deconstruction is itself expressed in terms of what Derrida calls the language of “decentring.”
In this context a “centre” is any sign which has been absolutised as having self-identity. Derrida’s argument here is that any sign thought to be an absolute “centre” with self-identity can itself be fractured into *Différance*, a chain of differences/ deferrals. Derrida in his book *Writing and Difference* describes his theme of decentring as “the stated abandonment of all reference to a centre, to a subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin, or to an absolute archia.”(286)

Derrida further asserts that his project of decentring emerged as the development of a major “rupture” in the history of structure, which took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, heralded especially by Nietzsche’s destruction of all axiological-ontological systems as well as Heidegger’s destruction of traditional metaphysics and onto-theology. Hence, Derrida writes in the same book: “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.” (279)

Derrida adds that although the history of metaphysical structure has run through a long series of “centres” like substance, essence, subject, energy, ego, consciousness, God or man, “it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no centre.”(280) Consequently, Derrida endeavours to deconstruct the various “centrism” which have afflicted philosophical and theological discourse such as ethnocentrism, anthropocentrism, phallocentrism, egocentrism, theocentrism and
logocentrism. Derrida commences his deconstruction of the Western metaphysics of presence with an effort to critically decentre onto-theological discourse. In the Western metaphysics of presence, God has been comprehended as Absolute Being, Presence or Identity. In other words, God is the absolute Centre.

In this context Derrida speaks of a “negative atheology” which endeavours to deconstruct the transcendent God of theocentrism, thought of as the Transcendental Signified. He writes: “Just as there is a negative theology, there is a negative atheology. An accomplice of the former, it still pronounces the absence of a centre.” (297)

As discussed in the second chapter, Derrida is not propounding nihilism since all absolute centres deconstructed through *Différance* are said to reappear as “trace,” understood as interplay of presence and absence or identity and difference. As differential “trace” all fixed metaphysical centres including the transcendent God of theocentrism and the individual self of egocentrism or anthropocentrism are placed under erasure, i.e., written with a cross mark X, thereby to signify a presence which is at the same time absent and an absence which is at the same time present.

The other two concepts related to Derrida’s view of presence are the “trace” and “supplementarity”. Each signifier, if it means anything, means as a result of
difference from a virtually infinite number of other signifiers. These other signifiers are not present, yet they are not completely absent, either, since they help to establish whatever meaning the given signifier takes on. This is the “trace”, a kind of residue of all of the other meanings that any given signifier does not appear to have, but on which it depends for its own meaning. In this context, of course, the idea of any utterance having an exact, unique, definitive meaning is an illusion. All that one really has is the play of signification.

Moreover, although language seems to lack something--the presence of the signified--it more than makes up for this through what Derrida refers to as the supplement, the “superabundance” of the signifier. A supplement is something that adds to another thing, while not being part of it. This is precisely the way signifiers work, in their *Différance*. That supplement, while not present in any given signifier, adds to the play of signification of the signifier. Hence, any utterance always has many more potential meanings than it appears to need, and some of those meanings may go in entirely different directions--hence, they way in which texts can deconstruct themselves in their attempts to mean something.

They mean something, nothing, and potentially everything at the same time. Thus Derrida cites Saussure’s philosophy of difference in language which illustrates how there can be efficient functionality, meaning and even understanding without there being ‘things’ to grasp in themselves. For Derrida, the
origin of language is mystical – a Différance that cannot be formulated or figured outside of a fluid metaphorisation that changes from text to text. More discussion on language is reserved for the next chapter and now the discussion continues with the definition of Sunyata.

**Sunyata**

*Sunyata* is the principle concept of Nagarjuna who is the man behind *Mahayana* or the *Madhyamika* Buddhism. *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia* defines *Sunyata* as follows,

*Sunyata* is one of the main tenets of *Mahayana* Buddhism, first presented by the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajna-paramita*) scriptures and later systematised by the *Madhyamika* school. Early Buddhist schools of *Abhidharma*, or scholastic metaphysics, analyzed reality into ultimate entities, or *dharmas*, arising and ceasing in irreducible moments in time. The Mahayanists reacted against this realistic pluralism by stating that all *dharmas* are “empty,” without self-nature (*svabhava*) or essence.

<http://www.reference.com/browse/columbia/Sunyata>

*Sunyata* was a radical restatement of the central Buddhist teaching of non-self (*anatman*). It was declared that not only ordinary objects, but the Buddha, *nirvana*, and also emptiness itself are all “empty.” The teaching attempts to eradicate mental attachment and the perception of duality, which, since it is a basis
for aversion to bondage in birth-and-death (samsara) and desire for nirvana, may obstruct the Bodhisattva’s compassionate vow to save all beings before entering nirvana himself. Wisdom (prajna), or direct insight into emptiness, is the sixth perfection (paramita) of a Bodhisattva.

It is stressed by both Buddhist writers and Western scholars that emptiness is not an entity, nor a metaphysical or cosmological absolute, nor is it nothingness or annihilation. Empty things are neither existent nor nonexistent, and their true nature is thus called not only emptiness but also suchness (tathata). As explicated in the previous chapter, Buddhism originated in India around the sixth century as a reaction against the religious and social order of the Brahmin establishment. The appearance of the Buddha wrought a great change of the world of Indian thought and religion. Prior to the Buddha, the concept of samsara, or transmigration, had been one of the central concepts of the Indian tradition. Transmigration meant that all phenomena were bound to repeat themselves infinitely over the long and cyclical span of cosmic time.

Another important feature of pre-Buddhist thought in India was, as articulated in the Upanishads, the concept of the absolute self, atman, and its identity with the ultimate truth of the cosmos, or Brahman. The atman was destined to pass through life after life, its fate decided by the good and evil deeds of the self. The Buddha, however, denied the existence of the absolute self. He
taught that no self-existing, integral, unchanging, and imperishable subject existed. All that did exist was a series of selves, born and extinguished from moment to moment. This was the revolutionary Buddhist teaching of non-self (anatman), which denied the existence of samsara as a substantial entity.

The primary goal of Buddhism was the liberation from the cycle of birth-and-rebirth (samsara). According to the Buddhist theory of samsara, sentient beings are continually reborn into several realms after they die. The law of karma asserts that when one performs virtuous actions, one is reborn into the higher, more pleasant realms, and, conversely, when one performs non-virtuous actions, one is reborn into the lower, more unpleasant realms. Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha, taught that the individual can attain liberation (nirvana) from the cycle of birth-and-rebirth by eliminating all attachments to the things of this world. All attachments are eliminated when one directly realizes the fact of “no-self” (anatman) – in other words, that the self is an “illusion” (maya) and, therefore, that there is no real basis for evaluating things as desirable or undesirable.

The Mahayana (greater vehicle) school of Buddhism, which emerged in India by the first century B.C. extended the notion of no-self to all phenomena with the conception of “emptiness” (Sunyata) not only is the self an illusion, so is every discrete phenomenon, and therefore, there are no real objects to become attached to in the first place and there is no real self to do the grasping. Thus,
while the ordinary consciousness of the normally socialized individual is in a state
of “ignorance” (avidya) of the truth of emptiness, “enlightenment” consists of the
realization of emptiness.

Nagarjuna systematized the concept of “emptiness” (Sunyata), which first
appeared in the Prajnaparamita Sutras, and founded the first philosophical school
of Mahayana Buddhism (Madhyamika). As mentioned above, before Nagarjuna,
there was a school of Buddhist thinkers centered around the numerous
Prajnaparamita, or Perfection of Wisdom, sutras. They are now sometimes called
the Madhyamikas, or those of the Middle View. Their philosophy was based on
the concept of emptiness (Sunyata) taught in the Prajnaparamita sutras.

According to the early Madhyamikas, all phenomena were no more than
conventional names. Since the names lacked substantial existence, the phenomena
they identified also lacked substantial existence. The material world was a
phantasmal thing, a parade of names and concepts without true existence.
Nagarjuna revised and systematised this school of thought, rescuing the concept of
emptiness from falling into mere nihilism.

Nagarjuna articulated his “unobstructed middle way,” in the famous eight
negations of the Middle way, and from his interpretation of the concept of
emptiness originated a philosophy that transcended Western dualism.
The negations in Nagarjuna’s *Mulamadhyamakakarika* are as follows,

- non-origination, non-extinction,
- non-destruction, non-permanence,
- non-identity, non-differentiation
- non-coming (into being), non-going (out of being). (39)

Rather than establishing a fixed dogma of his own, Nagarjuna refuted all dogmatic views by showing how their initial propositions lead to unwarranted conclusions. In other words, Nagarjuna’s *Sunyata* philosophy unfreezes all fixed and frozen concepts and extreme dichotomies and is a “radically reflexive” perspective that “unsettles” any version of reality, making visible the work of settling. One of several ways Nagarjuna explains emptiness is by identifying it with dependent co-arising (*pratitya-samutpada*): Since things arise dependently, they are without essence of their own; as they are without essence, they are void (i.e., devoid of the thing itself), and hence empty of ‘own-being.

T. R. V. Murti in his book *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A study of Madhyamika System* explains Nagarjuna’s interpretation of dependent co-arising in a very similar way:

Any fact of experience is not a thing in itself; it is what it is in relation to other entities, and these in turn depend on others. . . . There is no whole apart from the parts and vice versa. Things that derive their being and
nature by mutual dependence are nothing in themselves; they are not real.

(28)

Understanding emptiness involves an appreciation of the mutual dependence of or reflexive connections between any phenomenon and its context and the ability to perceive “true reality” or “suchness” (tathata), in other words, reality just as it is without the duality imposed by conceptual categories. Being radically reflexive, the Sunyata doctrine recognises itself, as well as every other Buddhist doctrine, as a relative construction and, therefore, as incapable of capturing “ultimate truth,” or emptiness.

Emptiness can only be “directly realised” or experienced, and this experience comes with the practice of Buddhist meditation. For example, Zen Buddhists consider sitting meditation the only necessary practice for directly realizing ultimate truth; Sunyata philosophy is only considered valuable to the extent that it is useful as a complement to a student’s meditation practice.

The ultimate truth of existence is comprehended by the term “emptiness” (Sunyata), one of the subtlest and most sophisticated concepts in the philosophical armory of Mahayana Buddhism. Understanding Sunyata entails the awareness that all things rely for their existence on causal factors and as such are devoid of any permanent “own-being” (svabhava).
The purely relative existence of all *dharmas* taught by this doctrine entails the realization that the things of this world, the self (*atman*) included, are merely the reifications of conceptual and linguistic distinctions formed under the productive influence of fundamental ignorance (*avidya*).

In so far as things of this world derive their reality solely from a nexus of causal conditions (*pratitya-samutpada*), their nature, what they all share, is precisely a “lack” of self-nature. *Sunyata* is saying ‘yes to all things’. All things are affirmed as they are in their positivity on the field of immanence/nothingness. Irreducibility becomes through “no-thingness.” A Buddhist saying: “differentiation as it is is equality; equality as it is differentiation.” The irreducible singularities and particularities are not merely that, they are not merely nonessential but rather prototypes of the universal.

**Deeper implication of Sunyata**

Jay L. Garfield in his critical essay “Dependent Arising and The Emptiness of Emptiness: Why Did Nagarjuna Start with Causation?” Explains what *Sunyata* is in the following words,

The central topic of the text is emptiness (*Sunyata*) --the Buddhist technical term for the lack of independent existence, inherent existence, or essence in things. Nagarjuna relentlessly analyzes phenomena or processes that appear to exist independently and argues that they cannot
so exist, and yet, though lacking the inherent existence imputed to them either by naive common sense or by sophisticated, realistic philosophical theory, these phenomena are not nonexistent--they are, he argues, conventionally real. (2)

Nagarjuna taught the principle of *Sunyata*. It is usually translated “emptiness,” or “nothingness.” Perhaps a more intelligible way of translating *Sunyata* would be “contentlessness.” For in Nagarjuna’s thought it meant that the metaphysical and religious notions of Buddhism are only temporarily useful concepts that have no content and that refer to no objective existence.

Nagarjuna taught that all ideas, philosophies, and beliefs are empty because everything is relative. According to his principle of “mutual co-origination,” no experiences are more basic than any others because all are intelligible only in terms of each other. He maintained that, since the very existence of the world itself arises from the mutual interaction of the relations within the world, enlightened consciousness should not focus on individual objects and experiences. Thus Nagarjuna’s reality shifted from the world of nouns to a world of verbs or, even more properly, to a world of adverbs, devoid of substantives.

What was significant about Nagarjuna’s teaching was not his elaborate and convoluted refutations of Buddhist thinking. These seem merely like clever
sophistry. But the implication of this teaching was that what is important about religious doctrine is not what it teaches about the universe, but how it works to bring about release from illusion. Nagarjuna taught that the distinction between nirvana and the world of suffering exists only in the mind.

Nagarjuna maintained that nirvana--the state of not clinging to anything, including belief in the Buddha and in nirvana--was achieved when one realized that there is not the slightest difference between samsara (the world of flux) and nirvana (the state of release), between time and eternity. This was the transforming vision of the Bodhisattva. Indeed, in the end, the Bodhisattva would discover the emptiness on which his whole sensibility was based and would see that there had never been any suffering beings, nor any bodhisattva to save them.

Nagarjuna concluded that the aim of Buddhism was not the achievement of some holy ideal but the destruction of all viewpoints. From there, enlightenment would follow of its own accord. This is the kind of thinking responsible for such curious Buddhist ideas as that if one meets the Buddha on the road, one should kill the Buddha, and that sitting in meditation can no more make one enlightened than polishing a floor tile can make it a mirror--and this in a religion the major practice of which is sitting meditation. According to Nagarjuna, enlightenment comes from seeing that all views and opinions are just views and opinions and have no real
substance. They are empty. Truth is empty. It is appreciation of this emptiness that brings release.

Nagarjuna in his masterpiece *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* lays bare the concept of *Sunyata*. In order to understand the parallel study of *Sunyata* with *Différance* it is imperative that one must possess the knowledge of Nagarjuna’s masterpiece and hence in the ensuing few pages Nagarjuna’s masterpiece is analysed, as it is being the primary source of this research project.

**Nagarjuna’s Masterpiece**

*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, or Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, is a key text by Nagarjuna. It now stands at the centre of modern philosophical analysis of the Madhyamaka philosophy, which is rapidly proliferating to match the rich and varied commentarial tradition that the text has accumulated over the centuries since its composition. *The Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* is divided into twenty-seven chapters.

The first chapter addresses dependent origination. Nagarjuna begins with causation for deeper, more systematic reasons. In chapters 2 through 23, Nagarjuna addresses a wide range of phenomena, including external perceptible, psychological processes, relations, and putative substances and attributes, arguing that all are empty. In the final four chapters, Nagarjuna replies
to objections and generalizes the particular analyses into a broad theory concerning the nature of emptiness itself and the relation between the two truths, emptiness and dependent arising itself.

It is generally acknowledged that chapter 24, the examination of the Four Noble Truths, is the central chapter of the text and the climax of the argument. One verse of this chapter, verse 18, has received so much attention that interpretations of it alone represent the foundations of major Buddhist schools in East Asia: Nagarjuna in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* says,

> Whatever is dependently co-arisen
> That is explained to be emptiness.
> That, being a dependent designation
> Is itself the middle way.” (18)

Here Nagarjuna asserts the fundamental identity of emptiness, or the ultimate truth, the dependently originated and verbal convention. Moreover, he asserts that understanding this relation is itself the middle-way philosophical view which he articulates in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

This verse and the discussion in the chapters that follow provide the fulcrum for Candrakiirti’s more explicit characterization of the emptiness of emptiness as an interpretation of Nagarjuna’s philosophical system - the interpretation that is definitive of the *Praasangika-Maadhyamika* school.
The doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness is not only as a dramatic philosophical conclusion to be drawn at the end of twenty-four chapters of argument, but it is the perspective implicit in the argument from the very beginning, and only rendered explicit in chapter 24.

**Competing Interpretations**

Nagarjuna’s argument in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* is unusually susceptible to interpretation, as it is expressed almost wholly as a series of often cryptic refutations. One can classify the divergent treatments of the *Madhyamakakārikā* under three headings: those presenting the text as an appendix to a previously established philosophical tradition, those reading the text as a poem to subsequent philosophical developments, and those that would present it as philosophical teaching unto itself.

It is to be observed that Nagarjuna’s other works are not nearly so constrained in form, and have not been given a place of equal prominence in modern scholarship. This is sometimes attributable to misgivings over the authenticity of other texts (many of which are not extant in Sanskrit), but is sometimes due to sectarian biases. The openness of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* to interpretation and re-interpretation has garnered the interest of diverse religious and secular schools, and has at the same time fostered a reluctance to interpret it in light of the same author's other, less ambiguous writings.
Form and content of the text

The early chapters

The early chapters of the Mūlamadhyamakārikā, deal mostly with basic metaphysical categories like causation, time, and agency. In general, they pose questions regarding the basic categories of Indian philosophy, trying to ascertain what are the conditions necessary for these concepts to be coherent and non-contradictory. Nagarjuna’s conclusion is uniformly negative; he finds that none of these ideas are self-sufficient, and as such none can found any of the others; there are no viable foundations. The chapters of Mūlamadhyamakārikā are:

1. Pratyaya pariṣṭā: Examination of Relational Condition.
2. Gatāgata pariṣṭā: Examination of What Has and What Has Not Transpired.
3. Caksurādindriya pariṣṭā: Examination of Sense Organs.
4. Skandha pariṣṭā: Examination of the Skandhas.
5. Dhātu pariṣṭā: Examination of the Dhatūs.
7. Samskṛta pariṣṭā: Examination of the Created Realm of Existence.
10. Agnīndhana pariṣṭā: Examination of Wood and Fire.
12. Duhkha pariṣṭā: Examination of the Suffering. (ix)
The later chapters

In these chapters, Nagarjuna begins to move away from simply negating others’ concepts and beings, slowly, to put forward some assertions of his own. In these chapters, Nagarjuna puts forth his boldest reasoning, including such assertions as: The emptiness of all things, the identity of pratītyasamutpāda with Sunyata, and the in differentiability of nirvana from samsara, the tentative or merely conventional nature of all truth. These chapters are as follows; note the clustering of 24-26, and also the nature of the last chapter:

13. Samskāra parīksā: Examination of Mental Conformation.
14. Samsarga parīksā: Examination of Combination or Union.
15. Svabhāva parīksā: Examination of Self-nature.
16. Bandhanamokā parīksā: Examination of Bondage and Release.
18. Ātma parīksā: Examination of Bifurcated Self.
22. Tathāgata parīksā: Examination of the Tathāgata.
23. Viparyāsa parīksā: Examination of the Perversion of Truth.
24. Āryasatya parīksā: Examination of the Four-fold Noble Truth
25. Nirvāṇa parīksā: Examination of Nirvāṇa.

27. *Dṛṣṭi parīksā*: Examination of (Dogmatic) Views. (x)

**The Purpose of the Masterpiece**

The *Madhyamakakārikā*’s ultimate purpose was not to stake out a sectarian position. Nagarjuna repeatedly and emphatically states that to make a “fixed view” of his teaching is to miss its point. The purpose of the *Madhyamakakārikā*’s short course in reasoning is to demonstrate the fallacy of clinging to views (or any standpoint whatever, however valid or true) and, in so doing, to remove an obstacle to enlightenment. For this reason it may be described as an “anti-philosophy” as well as a philosophy in its own right.

Buddhism, though it spans two and a half millennia and multiple cultural and linguistic contexts, can be said to have only one ultimate aim: the liberation of sentient beings from suffering (duhkha). Though the nature of ‘liberation’ is much contested, it is fair to characterize Buddhist thought as being guided broadly by that context. What one might refer to, then, as Buddhist philosophy, epistemology or ontology, must be understood to be taking part within that framework. The destruction of false or mistaken views is therefore necessary if one hopes to attain to real wisdom – the profound view which recognizes reality accurately as it is. In the study of Buddhist thought, there are few concepts which cause greater distress
to the aspiring student than Sunyata. It describes the essenceless, illusory nature of reality and is therefore the ultimate antidote to wrong views.

In Nagarjuna’s terms, synonymous with this emptiness which characterizes all of conventional reality is *pratitya-samutpada*, or dependent origination. Dependent origination, while it is a doctrine which has been interpreted somewhat differently by various Buddhist schools, according to Nagarjuna and the tradition that followed him, “denotes the nexus between phenomena in virtue of which events depend on other events, composites depend on their parts, and so forth” (Garfield 91).

In plainer English, it describes interdependence: no-thing exists apart from its relationship with other ‘things’; there is no-thing which ‘is’ or exists independently. What this amounts to ontologically, is that no-thing has a permanent or individual essence (svabhava), there is only this dependent origination. That absence of a lasting, individual essence is another way to understand Sunyata.

Having seen detailed explications of the highly influential and the key concepts of both the thinkers, a comparative study of Derrida’s *Différance* and Nagarjuna’s *Sunyata* is made further. The influence of Nagarjuna on Derrida is not direct. It is true that oriental ideas, like that of Nagarjuna have exercised a
considerable influence on Western thought and for a variety of reasons many do believe that such influence has remained negligible but surely the reality lies somewhere between these two extremes, and the interest taken by Western thinkers in Eastern thought in the modern period has moved from one of passing interest, through serious attention, to some level of assimilation and acceptance. Through this parallel study let us explore the extent of Nagarjuna’s influence on Derrida is explored as part of the quest to find the forefather of Derrida.

**Comparing Derrida and Nagarjuna; Proximity between *Svārya* and *Différance***

Derrida focused on a number of aspects in Buddhism and argued that Buddhism, was largely decentred, non-logocentric. The idea of an ‘oriental’ nothingness slipped in wonderfully with deconstructionist notions of the absence of self-presence, signified, open-endedness, empty spaces; the non-essential, non teleological nature of Buddhist thought. These were compared to Western epistemologies and ontologies of Being; a history of numerous centres like essence, Man, subject, consciousness, being.

In a way, Nagarjuna’s concept of *Svārya* is a concept which encompasses a necessary non-origin and dependence, an emptiness of inherent and independent existence. This concept of emptiness matches Derridean Difference; for this term as explicated in detail above reflects a sense of the non-origination in Buddhist thought, all things are non-originary in Derrida’s.
Deconstruction and the logic of Différance and Nagarjuna’s Buddhism

Any category of presence, being, or identity can be deconstructed into a play of differences. Each term is infected by the trace of its difference. Each term is non-identical, rather eternally deferred into a chain of negative differences, never reaching a final signified, the illusory transcendental signified. Signifieds are only a play of floating signifiers; any sign empties out into a network of differential relations.

Centres are merely signs/categories/identities that have become absolutised as having self-identity. Any sign with centre/self-identity, through deconstruction, can be fractured into Différance, a chain of differences/deferrals. Through deconstruction, all centres appear as trace, the interplay of presence and absence, identity and difference. These differential traces (metaphysical centres) including the individual self are placed under erasure signifying presence which is simultaneously absent; an absence which is simultaneously present; “aporia” – subverting its grounds, dispersing meanings into indeterminacy – chain of signifiers versus being/non-being.

One can say that the practice of Nagarjuna’s Mahayana Buddhism is a process of deconstruction; a process in which the Buddhist learns to use structures only to deconstruct them, slowly finding his/her way to a pure unmediated state devoid of structures. One could call it an aesthetic-ethical form of living, or
becoming. For Buddhist theorist/theologist Magliola, the Buddhist logic of
_Sunyata_ is a differential logic structurally equivalent with the logic of _Différance_.
_Sunyata_ is absolute nothingness.

This isn’t nihilism rather an infinite openness devoid of centres, including
the anthropocentric. The field of _Sunyata_ is a field whose centre is everywhere.
Through the logic of _Sunyata_, then, is achieved a deconstruction of metaphysical
centres, a multicentring of the reality continuum wherein each and every event is
now affirmed in its positive suchness as a unique centre. That is to say, since the
infinite openness of _Sunyata_ or emptiness is devoid of all absolute centres, now all
phenomena are affirmed as individual centres in the locus of absolute nothingness.

Derrida’s project of deconstructionism involves a critical strategy of
decentring i.e., what he describes as the stated abandonment of all reference to a
centre, to a subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin, or to an absolute
“archia”. There is a close structural proximity between Buddhist _Sunyata_ and
Derrida’s ‘difference’ both of which function to place ‘under erasure’ and thereby
to disseminate all fixed metaphysical centres having ‘self-identity’ or ‘self-
presence’ into a chain of differential relationships with no positive entities.

The non-substantialist and un-canedtered worldview of _Mahayana_ Buddhism
in general can best be interpreted through Derrida’s vision of a dislocated reality
devoid of all fixed centres. For instance, the thesis of Robert Magliola’s Derrida on the Mend is that the Buddhist logic of *Sunyata* is in fact a differential logic which is itself structurally isomorphic with Derrida's logic of *Différance*. Magliola writes: “I shall argue that Nagarjuna’s ("suunysataa") ("devoidness") is Derrida’s *Différance*, and is the absolute negation which absolutely deconstitutes but which constitutes directional trace.” (15)

According to Magliola, the *Différance* of Derrida, like the *Sunyata* of Buddhism, represents a critical deconstruction of the principle of self-identity, i.e., what in Buddhist discourse takes the form of deconstituting all substantialist modes of own-being or self-existence (*svabhaava*). Through deconstructive analysis all metaphysical centres understood as a mode of absolute self-identity are disseminated into a network of differential relationships in which there are no positive entities. He goes on to assert that the differential Buddhism of Nagarjuna with its radical deconstruction of all fixed metaphysical centres reaches its culmination in the tradition of East Asian Zen Buddhism.

In this context, he criticises all forms of centric Zen wherein the Buddha-nature thus understood becomes an infinite Centre, arguing that “differential Zen, like Nagarjuna’s *Madhyamika*, disclaims ‘cantered’ experience of any kind. However, the absolute negation of *Différance* also signals the emergence of non-substantial ‘trace’ which is simultaneously absent yet present, present yet absent.
In this context, Magliola argues that *Différance* as the interplay of identity and difference or presence and absence is equivalent to Nagarjuna’s Buddhist notion of “Sunyata; since it constitutes a Middle Way between the ‘it is’ of eternalism and the ‘it is not’ of nihilism.”(Magliola, 18)

**Deconstruction at work in Sunyata and in Différance**

The point of *Sunyata* is to deconstruct the self-existence/self- presence of things. Nagarjuna was concerned not only about the supposedly self-sufficient atomic elements of the *Abhidharma* analysis, but also about the repressed, unconscious metaphysics of commonsense, according to which the world is a collection of existing things that originate and eventually disappear. The corresponding danger was that *Sunyata* would itself become re-appropriated into metaphysics, so Nagarjuna was careful to warn that *Sunyata* was a heuristic, not a cognitive notion. Although the concept of *Sunyata* is so central to *Madhyamika* analysis that the school became known as sunyavada i.e., the way of sunya, there is no such thing as *Sunyata*. Here the obvious parallel with Derrida’s *Différance* runs deep.

*Sunyata*, like *Différance*, is permanently under erasure, deployed for tactical reasons but denied any semantic or conceptual stability. It presupposes the everyday because it is parasitic on the notion of things, which it refutes. Likewise, to make the application of *Sunyata* into a method would miss the point of
Nagarjuna’s deconstruction as much as Derrida’s. Derrida is concerned that one does not replace the specific, detailed activity of deconstructive reading with some generalized idea about that activity that presumes to comprehend all its different types of application. For Nagarjuna, however, Sunyata aims at the exhaustion of all theories and views, because he has another ambition, as one shall see; the purpose of Sunyata is to help one let-go of his or her concepts, in which case one must let-go of the concept of Sunyata as well.

For both, *différance* and Sunyata is a non-site or non-philosophical site from which to question philosophy itself. But, as Derrida emphasises, the history of philosophy is the metaphysical re- incorporation of such non-sites. Nagarjuna warned, as strongly as he could, that Sunyata was a snake which, if grasped at the wrong end, could be fatal; yet that is precisely what happened repeatedly in later Buddhism. If those for whom Sunyata is itself a theory are incurable, the question why so many people seem to be incurable must be addressed.

**Theory of rising/falling: in Nagarjuna and Derrida**

Derridean deconstruction of identity intersects with Sunyata. Derrida designs his style to undo entities and itself, and this undoing happens to remind a comparative philosopher of Buddhist self-undoing. In early Buddhism, Buddhist “causality” is explained in terms of rising/falling, awareness of rising/falling undoes the illusion of an intact human ego.
Nagarjuna’s *Madhyamika* takes the further step of arguing even the Law of Buddhist Causality is devoid. Nagarjuna does this by arguing that theories of rising/falling, if followed through with logical rigor, would have the alleged rising and falling either tangling-up in each other, or cancelling each other out.

Nagarjuna also deconstructs the holistic micro-entities which build the illusions of the world. Rising/falling are thus cut-off. This is an important provision in terms of applicability to Derridean thought, since Derridean devoiding is often accomplished by a kind of rising/falling and Derrida often goes on to tangle up the rising/falling into an intersection, crossing or double-bind.

**Derrida’s in-decidability and Nagarjuna’s middle path**

For Derrida, the in-decidability of the meaning in a text, arises out of the inexhaustibility of context. This tension is reminiscent of Nagarjuna’s concept of the middle path. Like Derrida’s in-decidability, Nagarjuna’s concept of the middle path expresses the non-identity of an entity, the impossibility of making a once-and-for-all demarcation. The openness by nature readjusts one’s relationship with others as well as one’s own identity. Hence, the openness of an entity cannot but be related to the political and the ethical.

Thus as discussed above, there are lots of similarities in the thinking of both Derrida and Nagarjuna. These similarities in the thought processes of both the
thinkers would be a sure enough proof for this research work which aims at finding the forefather of Derrida. Though Nagarjuna had lived millennium years ago, his philosophy remained alive in the world and has power over the great though process of the world.

The philosophy of Nagarjuna has found a way into the thought process of Derrida and as it is a common saying there are no un-thought thoughts. What looks like seemingly a new idea had already been thought of and discussed in far of lands and in different languages, this is how we find Derridean thoughts having similar counter thinking in Nagarjuna’s Buddhist philosophy.

Having discussed the central philosophic thoughts of Derrida and Nagarjuna, the researcher intends in the next chapter to discuss their view points on language and relate how both the thinkers use language in an unusual ways, which is a kind of matrix or play with the words and attempt further comparison with the thinkers in order to firmly establish that Nagarjuna is really the forefather of Derrida and Derridean thoughts.