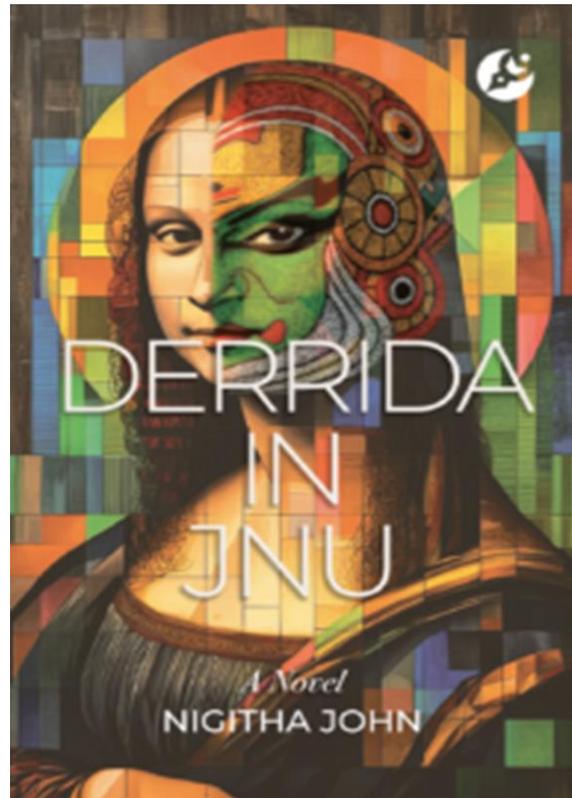


***Derrida in JNU: A Novel* by Nigitha John, New Delhi: Magic Moon Publishers Private Limited, ISBN 978-8198144584, Pages-172, 2025, Price: 600/-**

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From the fertile soil of Kerala—where monsoon myths mingle with the roar of resistance—Nigitha John rises as a bilingual storyteller in Malayalam and English. Her words are not mere reflections; they are interventions—piercing silences, unsettling comforts, and forging a language that remembers, resists, and reimagines. Her *Derrida in JNU: A Novel* (2025) is such a legacy that repels narrative obviousness, linear ideology, and even genre boundaries. Knitting together the political, intellectual, and emotional landscapes of JNU—Jawaharlal Nehru University—she presents not just a narrative but a textual experiment,



a poetic provocation, and a tribute to the philosophical hauntings of Jacques Derrida that attracts the readers towards it as the flowers do to the bees. Through silence, fragmentation, irony, and detour, it carves out a space where deconstruction meets dissent, and theory becomes a lived reality. Blessed with literary depth and emotional resonance in magical realism, the pages of the book stimulate bibliophiles to deconstruct the philosophy of deconstruction, which explores the inherent contradictions and instabilities within language and thought. As a novel, it does not follow the rules—it deconstructs them, reveals them, and brings them to light through one hundred and seventy-three pages with the help of Magic Moon Publishers Pvt—Ltd in May 2025.

Title of the Book: Blessed with Striking Juxtaposition

The title Derrida in JNU immediately evokes a striking juxtaposition—one that fuses the dense, deconstructive legacy of Jacques Derrida with the vibrant, politically charged landscape of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). It is not merely an academic allusion but a cultural signal that invites readers to think beyond traditional binaries—of East and West, theory and practice, campus, and cosmos. The presence of Derrida in the heart of a contemporary Indian university does not suggest a physical arrival but a conceptual infiltration. His ideas haunt the classrooms, debates, protests, and even silences of JNU. The title prompts the reader to question: What happens when a Western post-structuralist philosopher is relocated into the ideological and lived terrain of Indian academia? It becomes a metaphor for intellectual unrest, for the constant unlayering of meaning, and for a campus that thrives on dialogue, dissent, and disruption. The title thus functions as both an invitation and a challenge—to rethink how global thought reshapes local spaces and how institutions like JNU become crucibles of philosophical ferment.

The Space: JNU as a Living Text

JNU, where philosophy meets fiction, affection meets expression, poetry meets protest, silence meets slogans, midnight meets manifesto, and dreams meet discourse, is not merely a backdrop in the novel. It is an animate presence with whom Derrida walks arm in arm through the streets of the campus. John paints the campus with striking clarity—red-brick buildings weathered by time, corridors etched with graffiti and memory, protest marches pulsing through open grounds, tea stalls humming with the conversation, and classrooms where ideas clash and collide. It is a space alive with thought and tension. John's campus is not imagined—it is remembered. Beneath its vibrancy reside fractures: the weight of hierarchy, the sting of exclusion, and the quiet unease that lingers between moments of speech and silence. The university serves as both a refuge and a reminder of the world's ongoing struggles. Constant surveillance, ideological conflicts, entrenched academic structures, and significant socio-political divisions plague it. The space transforms into a site of contestation—where state-imposed narratives clash with voices from the margins and institutional silence is constantly challenged by student-led expressions. The red-bricked campus, long seen in Indian political imagination as a symbol of leftist legacy, assumes a deeper metaphorical resonance—standing not just for a political hue but for resistance, remembrance, and the refusal to conform. They witness dialogues, disagreements, disappearances, and Derridean playfulness. JNU becomes

a palimpsest—a space overwritten with traces of past and present, silence and speech, resistance and repression.

Characters as Traces, Not Types

Rather than crafting characters as fully formed individuals with backstories and conventional development arcs, John presents them as fragments—"traces" in the Derridean sense. Although the book deals with the narrative of Das and Diva, they are not stable identities but rather shifting positions within discourse. Moreover, readers encounter students, professors, and wanderers whose names often seem less important than their voices, their pauses, and their philosophical engagements. They are not so much defined by what they say but by how they hesitate, question, or withdraw. One may be reminded of Beckett's characters or Kafka's anonymous protagonists—not because they are passive, but because their agency is always deferred, always uncertain. For example, the protagonist—often unnamed or ambiguously identified—wanders through seminars, protests, and solitary contemplations. Their identity is secondary to their perception: their gaze upon JNU, upon Derrida, and the impossibility of final meanings.

Derrida as Phantom and Presence

Jacques Derrida, the French-Algerian philosopher and father of deconstruction, does not appear as a literal character. However, he hovers like a spectre—quoted, misquoted, interpreted, misunderstood, and invoked in hushed tones and academic debates. The novel does not aim to teach deconstruction in a didactic way. Instead, it embodies it. Derrida's key ideas—différance, trace, the metaphysics of presence, and the critique of logocentrism—are woven into the form of the novel itself. The narrative often collapses into ellipses. Chapters begin in the middle of a thought. Sentences unravel their meaning. Footnotes occasionally interrupt the main body of text as if to say: "Meaning is elsewhere." In doing so, John does not merely reference Derrida—she practices him. Derrida becomes not an object of study but a method of storytelling. Readers unfamiliar with deconstruction may find the prose opaque at times, but that is part of the point. The novel resists transparency because meaning is never entirely available. Language deceives. Texts betray. Moreover, reading is an act of political and philosophical responsibility.

Language as Political Terrain

It is never wrong to say that John commands the language and language, the book. Her prose is lyrical, yet it never draws attention to itself. It hums beneath the surface, beyond the thoughts, beyond the feelings and perceptions. Her pithy sentences also reflect her mastery.

They are shaped with such mastery that their brevity is never lost. Although they hold friction, nuance, and ambiguity, they keep alive the tension and sense that she wants to convey. Often, a single sentence opens up like a prism—holding not just one idea but several, each catching light differently depending on where the reader stands. Multilingualism, too, runs through her work—not as flair, but as fabric. English may carry the main thread, but Hindi, Malayalam, and Urdu appear without fanfare—untranslated, unglossed, as though slipping in from a conversation readers were already meant to overhear. This blending is not aesthetic; it is lived. It mirrors the quiet negotiations of thought and identity in Indian academic spaces, where borrowed languages mediate the push and pull of belonging and estrangement. The language here does more than tell the story—it is the story. It carries weight. It takes sides. On one end are the dry, stiff tones of bureaucracy—official notices, cold memos, and the clipped language of surveillance. Opposing them are the unruly voices of dissent: students chanting slogans, scribbling in margins, performing street plays, reciting verses late into the night. In this world, words do not just mean—they fight, they hide, they reveal. Even silence is not empty. It speaks volumes.

Themes of Surveillance, Censorship, and Absence

Undoubtedly, the novel is highly philosophical, but there is a smell of political profundity. Its narrative is haunted by references to student disappearances, government crackdowns, sedition charges, and the quiet terror of being watched. The protagonist, like many students, feels the presence of invisible eyes—through CCTV cameras, interrogatory emails, and media distortion. John does not explicitly name every political incident, but the allusions are clear. The echoes of Rohith Vemula, the protests following Kanhaiya Kumar's arrest, the discussions on nationalism, and the diminishing space for academic freedom in India are all present. The novel effectively portrays the discomfort of being young, critical, and outspoken in an environment marked by rising authoritarianism. Absence is another central motif in the book. It gives the sense of what is absent. Be it the disappearance of a student, the silence of a professor once known for radical thought, or the missing pages from a diary, all tell a lot. These absences are not just plot devices—they are epistemological wounds. They ask: What do we do with what is missing? How do we read what is not said?

Form as Resistance

One cannot review Derrida in JNU without addressing its form. The novel defies genre boundaries. It blends fiction, memoir, academic critique, political commentary, and poetic meditation. Some footnotes act like voices in a seminar. There are italicized monologues that

blur the lines between dreams and thoughts. There are gaps and dashes where one expects closure. This formal experimentation is not merely aesthetic—it is political. John seems to suggest that to write about deconstruction, dissent, and disruption within a university space; one must also disrupt the conventions of narrative. Form becomes a mirror of content. The absence of a linear plot may frustrate some readers, but it is a deliberate strategy. John's narrative refuses the comfort of resolution. Instead, it offers circularity, recursion, and slippage—a mimetic reflection of Derridean uncertainty.

Feminist Connotations

Though not foregrounded as a "feminist novel," *Derrida in JNU* carries strong feminist resonances. The central voice, likely female, moves through spaces where speech is often interrupted, appropriated, or policed. Women in the text are not passive—they argue, write, protest, vanish, and remember. However, they are also acutely aware of the patriarchal codes within both academic and activist circles. John avoids tokenism. Her feminist politics are subtle but fierce—present in the marginalia, in the bodily metaphors, in the discomfort with canonical thinking, and in the refusal to speak in a male-academic tone. It is a quiet feminist insurgency grounded in intellectual defiance rather than rhetorical assertion.

Reading as an Ethical Performance

Ultimately, *Derrida in JNU* is not just a book to be consumed—it is a text to be read with care, patience, and humility. John invites readers into an ethical relationship with language. Reading here is not just about comprehension but also about engagement, not about arrival but about wandering. The novel teaches us that not everything needs to be "understood" in traditional terms. Sometimes, the most potent insights lie in what resists paraphrase. John's work challenges the commodification of literature and education. It urges us to return to reading as a radical, responsible, and political act—especially in times when universities are under siege and the truth is increasingly negotiable.

Conclusion: A Necessary Disruption in Derridean Conception

Derrida in JNU by Nigitha John is not an easy read. It does not offer closure, catharsis, or clarity. However, it offers something more urgent: the possibility of thinking otherwise. In an era where academic institutions are being sanitized, standardized, and surveilled, this novel dares to fragment, digress, and speak in tongues. The stylistic disruptions, philosophical challenges, and poetic refusals that John applies are nothing but a manifesto that is quiet yet impactful, reminding readers that literature, much like theory, can still be subversive.

Furthermore, in a context of institutional decay and ideological oversight, deconstruction stands not only as a philosophical method but also as a means of survival and resistance. When reading Derrida at JNU, the readers engage not only with his ideas but also with a profound encounter with his work. They encounter themselves—hesitating at the thresholds of language, politics, and meaning. Moreover, perhaps, that is where all accurate reading begins. However, this book by Nigitha John is more than a campus novel—it is a compelling meditation on thought, resistance, and intellectual freedom. Set against the backdrop of one of India's most politically vibrant universities, it deftly weaves philosophy, personal struggle, and the quiet defiance of the written word. As a novel, it invites readers to contemplate, contest, and contend—not only with its characters but with the very act of reading and thinking in turbulent times. Read it not just for the story but for the echo it leaves in the mind long after. Do not leave it for tomorrow, tomorrow, and tomorrow, as, in Derridean terminology, it dismantles presence—always deferred, never arriving, a promise haunted by absence.

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Cover image of Derrida in JNU, by Nigitha John. Magic Moon Publishers, 26 May 2025.
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