

## **Disillusionment with Grand Narratives : An analysis of Jean Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*.**

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### Abstract

The present paper is an analysis of Jean- Francois Lyotard's opinion about Postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (509). In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* Lyotard traces the formation and decline of the Grand Narratives as the medium of making knowledge believable and legitimized. From the very early ages to the Enlightenment myth had been the self-sufficient means of preservation and distribution of knowledge without any claim of falsity or any proof of verification- as a self verified grand narrative. But during the Enlightenment era, when reason replaced religion, science too, by using reason and progress as proofs of verification, sought acceptance and became grand narrative. But, in twentieth century, when scientific knowledge was used more for destruction than creation, it lost its proofs of verification- the grand narratives of reason, progress, happiness, and freedom.

### Key words

Grand Narrative, Myth, Legitimization, Decline, Disillusionment, Reason

Most of the philosophical and theoretical enquiries, in the latter half of twentieth century, seem to be preoccupied with the concept of death, destruction, decline and disillusionment. Whether it is Jacques Derrida who pronounced the destruction of the eurocentric meaning or it is Roland Barthes who announced the death of the author, Jean Baudrillard's the death of the real and the symbol, and Jean – Francois Lyotard's decline of the grandnarrative, they all seem to be the voyagers of the same arc; and whether they belong to different fields of thoughts yet they all share the same source of inspiration—the nineteenth century German philosopher Frederic Nietzsche who had no respect for enlightenment values, reason, universality, morality and progress because he realized the word as “ the dance of the destructively creative and creatively destructive “ powers.(Powell,10)

In 1974 Lyotard became famous for *The Postmodern Condition :A Report on Knowledge*, an account commissioned by the council of the university of Quebec government. In this report he surveys the status of science and technology in the fields of knowledge. He makes clear in the very beginning that the purpose of this survey is to examine the “condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. I have decided to use the word *Postmodern* to describe that of incredulity toward metanarratives”(Lyotard 509). The survey has become something of a bible of Postmodernism. Although the term ‘Postmodernism’ was used earlier,”but it’s current sense and vogue can be said to have begun with Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*.(Barry 82)

In his Report Lyotard observes that for the past few decades scientific and technological changes have a major impact on knowledge. He predicted that no knowledge will survive that cannot be translated into computer language. Learning will no longer be associated with the training of minds because the transmission and storage of information will depend on computers. Informations will be produced and sold. Nations will fight for information as they used to fight for territories. People will try to steal information. The role of the state will grow weaker and huge multinational corporations will dominate(Powell 23). Then,Lyotard defines and distinguishes the kinds of knowledge. He says that scientific knowledge is not the only type,prior to this there is mythic knowledge that draws its authority from some pre- historic beginning:”God' s creation of the universe and the law dictated by God to the prophets(Waugh 412).Mythical narratives,Lyotard argues, invited and allowed the species by religion”(510).Lyotard describes,how the scientific knowledge and method legitimize themselves and make themselves believable and trustworthy simply by making a distinction between scientific and narrative discourse. In general sense, “a narrative is a story, whether told in prose or verse,involving events, characters, and what the characters say or do.” (Abrams 181)

Lyotard uses the term, ‘narrative’ in a specific sense with the adjective ‘grand’ and the prefix ‘meta’, for the popular stories, myths, legends and tales along with their legitimized selves. And such myths legitimize themselves as believable—“just in the telling and at the same time they legitimize the society in which they are told.”(Lyotard 509) In this way the teller of the myth does not have to present a proof or argument like a scientist, when he tells the story of creation.The teller of the myth legitimates it simply by stating:

“In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth, the earth was without form and Void, with darkness over the face of the abyss, and a mighty wind that swept over the surface ofThe waters. God said, ‘ let there be light, and there was light; and God saw that the light was Good, and he separated light from darkness.” (Genesis 1:1-2)

Here,the narrator has authority to tell, anyone listening gains the same authority merely by listening and “the myth, the narrator and the audience, they all form a kind of social unity. The

myth as a grand narrative requires no authorization or legitimization other than itself" (Lyotard 510). Myth narratives were useful for the preservation and transmission of knowledge from one generation to another generation because every generation is governed by "epistemophilia - a desire to know" (Culler 92). But with the passage of time these myth narratives for which Lyotard used the term "narrative discourse" turned superstitious. According to Lyotard, scientific discourse is a different kind of metanarrative than mythical narrative discourse. Scientific discourse cannot legitimize itself by itself. The scientist unlike the narrator of the myth of creation must be able to present the proof of verification and in the lack of which science cannot legitimize itself. According to Lyotard science has to seek another help and "since science cannot depend upon science to legitimize itself, it must turn to narratives." (Lyotard 510) Science uses two types of narratives, the first is associated with the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the enlightenment and the French Revolution. And second is the German philosophy of knowledge. By using both these narratives, the scientific reason took the place of religion and the ideas of progress, happiness and freedom became proofs for the legitimization of the scientific knowledge.

The French enlightenment narrative and the German narrative of knowledge are what Lyotard calls "metanarratives" or "grand narratives" (511). One another metanarrative is the social and economic philosophy of Marxism. These grand narratives subordinated the local narratives. Although the onset of the scientific grand narrative freed humankind from the tyranny of myth and superstition, but Lyotard also insists that the "emancipatory narratives" got their own totalitarian drawbacks by legitimizing Capitalism and political institutions that resulted in world war. According to Lyotard the problem is that after world war second people no longer believe in any of these two—the mythic or the scientific grand narratives because using the science and reason for construction of the gas chambers and nuclear weapons, people no longer experience freedom and liberation; and because of the disbelief in these metanarratives of freedom and liberation, which has legitimized science, no longer plays central role and "the Grand narratives decline". (Cobley 184). The grand narratives collapse:

...because of the effect of the computerization. Computer mediated communication replaces language as the vehicle of reason with information measures according to its effect. In other words, the postmodern condition is effected by a technology that harness language for quantitative evaluation, so that it is no longer determined by universal ideals. (Grant 409)

Thus, "The postmodern Condition is one of disillusionment with such narratives" (Waugh 412). People no more believe in metanarratives. The postmodern society is a society in which no single narrative looms large. In postmodern society, many micro-narrative are weaved together and these groups of small narratives replace the sole presence of one and grand narrative. By declining Enlightenment's ensign of progress and the modernist's motto of making things new,

Postmodernism, as Lyotard opines in "Defining the Postmodern", mainly "attempt to turn its back on this understanding of progress as the whole marching in lockstep toward the same utopian future"(1463). Instead, Lyotard advocates an appreciation for diversity and individual differences. He advocates the diversity of ways in which people choose to live because one cannot surely say that the one way of living is better and the other is not.

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