



Research Paper

Paralogy of Petit Narratives: a Lyotardian Reading of James Cameron's Titanic

Dhanya Joy,

Research Scholar of English, St.Thomas College, Pala, Kottayam – 686574, Kerala, India.

ABSTRACT: *The postmodern world is characterized by the “language games”, a notion put forward by Ludwig Wittgenstein. There is no transcendent reality behind them and they are self-validating. According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, one of the foremost thinkers of postmodernism, the social bond is composed of language “moves”. The organization of the language games is performed by metanarratives. The basis of modernity is, for Lyotard, a certain type of metanarrative organization. He defines postmodern as “incredulity toward metanarratives”. James Cameron’s film Titanic (1997) is a fictionalized account of the sinking of the RMS Titanic. The movie depicts the heroine’s disillusionment with the so called grand narratives like capitalism and Christianity. Rose is in search of a new epistemology that gives meaning to her life. Jack who embodies a typical postmodern spirit convinces her that there are only “petit narratives” that shape our lives. This paper attempts to explore Rose’s incredulity towards metanarratives like Christianity and capitalism. Titanic serves as a metaphor for metanarratives. Its huge size and the attribute “unsinkable” connote man’s resort to grand narratives. The luxury vessel carries with it another metanarrative, “the American Dream”. The ship sinks and all the overarching epistemologies collapse into futility. It becomes a symbol of “surface reality”, the only reality in a postmodern world. Jack, the hero of the movie is a typical postmodern figure whose roots are cut off. He drifts from place to place without the aid of any so called metanarratives. The “petit narratives” that make up his life appear meaningful to Rose and she falls in love with him. The abrupt end of their love relationship caused by Jack’s death itself is a “petit narrative”. Even love does not assume the role of a “grand narrative”. This paper analyses the ways in which the paralogy of “petit narratives” is at work in the movie Titanic.*

KEY WORDS: *Postmodernism, metanarratives, petit narratives, paralogy, language games.*

Received 06 April 2019; Accepted 26 April, 2019 © the Author(S) 2019.

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I. INTRODUCTION

“...[is] postmodernity the pastime of an old man who scrounges in the garbage-heap of finality looking for leftovers, who brandishes unconsciousnesses, lapses, limits, confines, goulags, parataxes, non senses, or paradoxes, and who turns this into the glory of his novelty, into his promise of change?” (Lyotard 32) Postmodernism defies definitions as it is replete with contradictions and paradoxes. Inhabiting a ‘hyperreal world’, we are part of postmodernity that posits play over purpose, anarchy over hierarchy, absence over presence, surface over depth and irony over metaphysics. The postmodern world is characterized by the “language games”, a notion put forward by Ludwig Wittgenstein. Words in language derive meaning from the contexts of their use and they never refer to some essence or ideal entity. The whole idea of “connections” between language and reality is a false one. Language is self-contained and it is impossible to step out of it. Wittgenstein compares language use with a game. The participants in a conversation are compared to players who perform certain tasks and make certain types of moves based on certain rules that are publically agreed upon. The context in which people use language is crucial here, as the rules as well as the game change according to the context. There is no transcendent reality behind the “language games” and they are self-validating. According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, one of the foremost thinkers of postmodernism, the social bond is composed of language “moves”. The organization of the language games is performed by metanarratives. The

basis of modernity is, for Lyotard, a certain type of metanarrative organization. He defines postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. . . . The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements – narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive and so on. . . . However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.”(Postmodern Condition xxiv)

As the term implies, a metanarrative sets out the rules of narratives and language games. This means that the metanarrative organizes language games and determines the success or failure of each statement or language “move” that takes place in them. Lyotard points out three characteristics of language games. First, that the rules of a language game are “the object of a contract, explicit or not, between the players”. (Postmodern Condition 10) That means the rules of a given language game like physics or fiction are not natural but determined by a community. Second, that “every utterance should be thought of as a ‘move’ in a game”. (Postmodern Condition 10) And third, that “if there are no rules there is no game, that even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game”. (Postmodern Condition 10) In short, all language “moves” follow certain rules. They are open to change and influence one another.

Like normal games, there are innumerable unique language games with distinct set of rules. The society itself is made up of language moves and each society has its own forms of politics, law and legitimation. As subjects, we exist within this series of language games. According to Lyotard, “A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island. . . . [E]ven before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent of a story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course.”(Postmodern Condition 15) He emphasizes the importance of respecting the differences between language games. The subversive measures against universal systems of organization should be encouraged. In order to achieve this potential for resistance, he argues that it is necessary to strive for paralogy within the system rather than attempting to create a new grand narrative that will bring all language games into line in a different way. By paralogy, which can literally be defined as bad or false logic, Lyotard is describing the way in which a language move has the potential to break the rules of the existing game (which is why it seems bad or false) in such a way that a new game needs to be developed.

As Sabina Lovibond puts it:

The Enlightenment pictured the human race as engaged in an effort towards universal moral and intellectual self-realisation, and so as the subject of a universal historical experience; it also postulated a universal human reason in terms of which social and political tendencies could be assessed as ‘progressive’ or otherwise (the goal of politics being defined as the realization of reason in practice). Postmodernism rejects this picture: that is to say, it rejects the doctrine of the unity of reason. It refuses to conceive of humanity as a unitary subject striving towards the goal of perfect coherence (in its common stock of beliefs) or of perfect cohesion and stability (in its political practice). (6)

Postmodernism advocates “reasons”. In other words, it propounds “petit narratives” in opposition to “metanarratives”. There is no single overarching idea that organizes our lives. But we have only the so-called mini narratives that employ a bad logic and have the potential to disrupt the existing language game. This logic becomes ‘bad’ only in terms of the liberal humanistic world view. The present day world regards it as a “different” logic. Thus it perpetuates plurality which in turn causes the end of every kind of monologic method of thinking. The tyrannical rule of metanarratives is disrupted by the paralogy of petit narratives.

James Cameron’s film *Titanic* (1997) is a fictionalized account of the sinking of the RMS Titanic. The movie centers around the forbidden romance of a beautiful aristocratic woman named Rose DeWitt Bukater and Jack Dawson, a penniless third-class artist aboard the ill-fated maiden voyage of the *Titanic*. Cameron could effectively weave a love story against the backdrop of a historical tragedy that occurred on 15 April 1912. When the star-crossed lovers are parted by death, the film becomes extremely moving. For many people, *Titanic* is a fatalist text that depicts life as essentially a matter of luck. By setting aside these liberal humanist notions regarding life, love and fate, the film can be viewed as a typical postmodern text. The movie captures the spirit of dissent that underlies the present day world. Shipwreck is a major theme in many modernist works like “The Wreck of the *Deutschland*”. Chronologically, the sinking of the *Titanic* occurred in the modern period. But the movie belongs to the postmodern period. The film does not give an objective account of the tragedy. Instead it imaginatively re-interprets the events that happened in the ship during its maiden voyage and the subsequent sinking. Cameron opines thus :

The story could not have been written better. . . . The juxtaposition of rich and poor, the gender roles played out unto death (women first), the stoicism and nobility of a bygone age, the magnificence of the great ship matched in scale only by the folly of the men who drove her hell-bent through the darkness. And above all the lesson: that life is uncertain, the future unknowable. . . . the unthinkable possible. (56)

The movie transgresses the distinction between 'high art' and 'low art' and reconsiders the past with irony. Thus *Titanic* is a postmodern text based on a modern theme.

Titanic is a gigantic expression of the rejection of social norms in favor of personal intuition and guidance. The importance is given to an individual rather than the society. Rose apparently lacks the agency to shape her life. She is oppressed by a controlling fiancé. He is a product of the patriarchal society where men are the spiritual heads of their families. But as all postmoderns agree, male headship leads only to oppression and violence. Rose's redemption is found in rejecting her perceived obligations to her social norms and choosing her own future by following her feelings. Coupled with capitalism, patriarchy chokes her. Being a woman of artistic sensibility, Rose admires the paintings of Picasso while Cal Hockley condemns them as sheer waste of money. She is under the constant surveillance of Hockley's guards. For Rose's mother her marriage is a means to achieve social security. She wants to pay off her husband's debts by Rose's proposed marriage with a business tycoon. Rose is a pawn in the game of marriage. She is forced to stick on to the bourgeois customs and

manners. In the film, there is a deep concern for the social hierarchies. For instance, people belonging to different social classes stay in the different quarters of the ship and "more money" means "better standards". Taking a closer look, the class distinction between the upper and lower classes is apparent even in the dress codes of men and women. Upper class women wear corsets and hats, which become the icons of their class.

Jack and Rose belong to different social classes. Rose is a young upper-class woman living according to social rules and has no control over her own life. She deems the *Titanic* as a slave ship and a "prison". On the other hand, Jack is a homeless, lower-class man who reckons the *Titanic* as a ship of his dreams. Even though they develop a friendship, Rose's mother and fiancé regard this as a "threat" to their reputation and forbid them to see each other. Again, in the sinking scene, the social class determines the fates of people as the upper-class members board the lifeboats while the crew and the lower-class people are left to die in their own quarters. But Jack and Rose transgress all social hierarchies as they involve in a love affair.

The inmates of the *Titanic* had a profound belief that the ship would not sink. It was an assurance given by the new scientific technologies used in its construction. Rose is the only person who is concerned about the possibility of sinking and she enquires about the lifeboats and jackets. It shows her disbelief in the metanarrative of science. Rose's incredulity toward Christianity is evident in her disillusionment with life and the resultant suicide attempt. Thus the postmodern incredulity toward the metanarratives of science, Christianity, capitalism and the "American Dream" is evident in the engagements of the protagonists of the movie. *Titanic* effectively captures the spirit of dissent that underlies the present day world.

II. THE DISCOURSE OF METANARRATIVES

The *Titanic*, hailed as the crowning glory of twentieth century science, carried the title "unsinkable". The gigantic ship was unrivalled in terms of its size, technological innovation and modern amenities. The *Titanic* was truly a modern project in that it was built out of the confidence acquired by the western world during the previous two centuries of progress. Designed by Thomas Andrews and built by The White Star Line in England, the *Titanic* was completed in 1912 and weighed over 45,000 tons. It was the largest moving man-made object of its day, and eyewitness accounts of it were often marked by a daunting reverence for her sheer size and presence. The *Titanic* was the pride of the White Star Line and became, for many, a symbol for man's ability to accomplish anything he endeavored. The designers, captain, and engineers claimed that she was the fastest and safest luxury liner on the ocean. We even hear the infamous boast that "God couldn't sink her." She was able to inspire in many, from designers and builders to the hundreds of thousands of men and women who participated in her glory, a false estimation of man's control of the universe. This confidence generated by the ship is tantamount to that of the assurance given by the metanarratives in ordering reality. Metaphorically, the ship stands for metanarratives. The modern man's recourse to the "overarching", "totalizing" explanations of things – like Christianity, science, capitalism etc has found expression in the movie.

According to Lyotard, modern science "legitimizes itself with reference to a metadiscourse... making an explicit appeal to some general grand narrative, such as ... the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth." (Postmodern Condition 60). The advanced scientific technologies employed in luxury vessels have a direct link to capitalism. "The games of scientific language become the games of the rich, in which whoever is wealthiest has the best chance of being right." (Postmodern Condition 45) Industrialisation has contributed much to the construction of the ship. Most of the inmates of the ship belong to upper middle class – a social class emerged as a result of industrialization. They have better amenities than the lower class people. The parties and cotillions that characterize a bourgeois life are held in the ship too. They become the site of social interaction. A running narration by the old Rose introduces the major characters in the movie. Along with the aristocrats there are upstarts like Molly Brown in the ship. Mrs. Brown is looked down upon by other first-class women as "vulgar". She is the only person who shows affection to Jack, other than Rose. She lends him a tuxedo (bought for her son) when he is invited to dinner in the first-class dining saloon.

The proposed marriage of Rose with Cal is an affair deeply rooted in capitalism. Ruth wants to resolve their family's financial problems and retain their high-class personae through this marriage. She threatens her daughter when she refuses to act according to her whims.

The ship is a space where class struggle is staged. The inmates of the ship are stratified socially and economically. The lower class people are placed in the lower deck of the ship. It symbolizes social stratification. This discrimination continues till the sinking of the ship as the third-class passengers are locked up at the bottom, denying all means of escape. The Manichean binaries of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are at work in this movie. Titanic is a product of the capitalist greed. The builders of the Titanic, represented by the ostentatious and eventually cowardly Bruce Ismay (Jonathan Hyde), are essentially described by Marx when he wrote: "[E]very person speculates on creating a new need in another so as to drive him to a fresh sacrifice, to place him in a new dependence and to seduce him into a new mode of gratification and therefore economic ruin" (61).

Titanic pictures the romance between Jack Dawson and Rose DeWitt Bukater who hail from diametrically opposite social backgrounds. Jack is a penniless wandering lass and Rose is an aristocratic lady who is engaged to a wealthy businessman. They represent the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. But Rose allies herself with the less fortunate fellow beings. She is indignant at the economic and social inequalities in the society. She deflects from the bourgeoisie ideals.

The movie revolves around the grand narrative of the "American Dream". The term was first coined by Adams as a way to encapsulate the desires of the average American for opportunity and advancement. Borman observed that Jefferson defined the American Dream by writing that everyone has the right to "the promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". These values helped to create a picture of the American Dream. In the book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, author Henry David Thoreau described the dream as the belief that there is "no ceiling on what a person of talent and drive"(76) can achieve with determination. It suggests that hardwork, commitment, dedication and sacrifice allow individuals to enjoy economic and material success. The argument is that social mobility is directly related to effort and work.(Protestant work ethics) People belong to all the social classes dream a better future in America and the ship is indeed a "ship of dreams" for them. Titanic is overtly concerned with an explicit condemnation of the upper class. The lower-class characters are virtuous and embody the ideals of both the material and the moralistic aspects of the American Dream.

When the playmates of Jack pawn the tickets at the poker game, he says "somebody's life is about to change." His friend Fabrizio exclaims "I go to America to be millionaire". After boarding the ship, Jack says "we're the luckiest sons of bitches in the world". Fabrizio dreams of the Statue of Liberty. The two young minds are very much excited about the fortunes that await them in America. But the fact is that it remains only as a dream – a futile dream. Both of them perish in the wreck.

The metanarrative of Christianity plays a very important role in the lives of the inmates of the ship. As evident from their names, most of the inmates are Christians. A church service where hymns are sung is held on the boat prior to striking the iceberg. The musicians play "Nearer, My God, to Thee." A scared passenger is intoning "Yea, though I walk through the valley of death ..." when Jack steps up behind him and snorts, "You wanna walk a little faster through that valley!?" As the ship sinks, a Catholic priest comforts the frightened by reciting the 23rd Psalm and offering prayers. Thus Titanic serves as a metaphor for metanarratives like science, capitalism, the American Dream and Christianity.

III. THE DISCOURSE OF PETIT NARRATIVES

In the postmodern worldview, narrative has lost its sacred power. The semiotic significance of this loss is profound, for by rejecting the traditional narratives of the West, the postmodern myth has rejected the centering structures that have long given meaning to human history. At the postmodern centre, there is only a void, which is the same as saying that there is no centre to the postmodern worldview. History has neither beginning nor an end, neither a creative origin nor an ultimate goal. Life is nothing more than a decentered, narrativeless course of waiting for death or for a non-existent God who never comes.

Postmodernism, in rejecting grand narratives, favors 'mininarratives', stories that explain small practices, local events rather than large-scale universal or global concepts. Postmodern mininarratives are always situational, provisional, contingent and temporary making no claim to universality, truth, reason or stability. (Klages 169)

In the movie, Jack is an advocate of "petit" narratives. He is a homeless artist who drifts from place to place to eke out a living. Jack along with his Italian friend Fabrizio boards the ship just before its departure after winning the tickets in a poker game. He exclaims "we're the luckiest sons of bitches in the world." Jack personifies the spirit of the times. According to Fredric Jameson, "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense – perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms."(57) Jack is a rootless person. He describes himself as a "tumbleweed blowing in the wind". Orphaned at an early age of

fifteen, Jack has toured numerous places in the world, including Paris. He is preoccupied with the present. Like Rose, he defies the reason and rationality of the bourgeois society. When Rose disagrees with Cal over a Picasso painting (another precursor to postmodernism with his cubist deconstructionist perspectivalism), she tells him "there's truth without logic." When Rose first talks with Jack about her dreams, she wishes she could just "chuck it all and become an artist... poor but free." Or maybe "a dancer like Isadora Duncan... a wild pagan spirit." Rose envies "Wandering Jack" because he leads a free life. His friends fret over his impossible desire for the aristocratic Rose. "He's not being logical," says one. "Amore is'a not logical," replies the other. Indeed he is not. This "king of the world" is the incarnation of the Existential man. And when he is implicated in stealing Cal's huge diamond, Rose chooses to believe Jack against all lines of evidence. She listens to her heart. At the end of the story, she says that Jack saved her in every way that a person can be saved. Something she thought God was supposed to do.

It is not by coincidence that the jewel that drives much of the story is called, "The Heart of the Ocean." When Rose stands on the Carpathia at the end she tells the treasure hunter, "You look for treasures in the wrong places, Mr. Lovett. Only life is priceless, and making each day count." She then casts off the huge diamond into the water, an expression of her ultimate love for Jack.

Both Jack and Rose prefer emotion over reason. For them love is not a rational choice to submit one's self to another trustworthy person. Rather it is an irrational resignation to one's intuitive feelings. Jack makes Rose stand at the front of the ship and close her eyes and release her grip to "feel" the freedom of letting go. When they dance, he tells her, "Just move with me. Don't think."

The Titanic serves as a metaphor for metanarratives. Its sinking represents the collapse of grand narratives in the postmodern era. Lyotard regards the metanarratives as violent and tyrannical in their imposition of a "totalising" pattern and a false universality on actions, events and things. Instead, all one can do is utilize local narratives to explain things; hence, knowledge can only be partial, fragmented and incomplete. This is regarded as a radically new form of epistemological freedom, resisting the dominance of overarching patterns which appear to ignore the details and experiences of differences in their effort to construct patterns which make sense of the world on a grand scale. Lyotard argues,

We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives—we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for post-modern scientific discourse. But as we have just seen, the little narrative (*petit recit*) remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science. (*Postmodern Condition* 60)

The sinking of the "unsinkable" ship signals the failure of science in assuring security to life. It can longer be considered as a reliable epistemology.

Truth, the basis of the speculative grand narrative, and justice, the goal of the grand narrative of emancipation, no longer have the universal appeal they did for modernity. This fundamentally changes the nature and status of knowledge in contemporary society. For Lyotard grand narratives are politically problematic. For example, the Enlightenment rationalism regards women as inferior beings. Many instances of gender bias can be pointed out from the movie. Rose is presented as a woman who cannot express her own opinions and have no control over her life. For Rose's mother her marriage is a means to achieve social security. She wants to pay off her husband's debts by Rose's proposed marriage with a business tycoon. For his fiancé Cal, Rose is nothing more than a possession and he wants to have control on her. When she refuses to marry Cal for financial security, Rose's mother says, "We're women. Our choices are never easy."

Throughout the film, Rose is portrayed as a weak woman who constantly needs a man. Cal provides her the financial security. Jack saves her life when she attempts to commit suicide. The idea of the weak woman is perpetuated by the verbal, emotional and physical abuse of Rose by her mother and her fiancé. The painful dresses and the corsets of the women give us an idea about how women perceive themselves only as objects of beauty. The plight of upper class women is further revealed by the fate of Madeleine, an eighteen-year old girl doomed to marry a rich old man named Astor. Cameron created the film's leading lady, Rose, to embody the twentieth-century female: "starting off the century as a suppressed and timid girl but becoming, through crisis and struggle, an expressive, mature and self-actualized woman" (Lubin 26). Robert von Dassanowsky, who discusses gender-role repression in postmodern America, identifies the abused female character from 1912: "despite progress, American culture – especially politically correct media imagery and attitude – still denies, discounts, or manages to justify gender inequality" (Dassanowsky 20). Titanic presents an interesting take on this claim. Although Rose is ultimately liberated from her unhappy life limited to riches and luxury in Titanic, she represents the female character who would have continued to be repressed by familial and social expectations. In the film, Rose says, "It was the ship of dreams to everyone else. To me it was a slave ship – taking me back to America in chains" (Lubin 26). This suggests her "suffragist pre-consciousness," and is able to set herself free from these chains through Jack's ability to show her an alternative life of equality and liberation. Molly Brown is the one who defies stereotypical norms in the society. She maintains her status and

wealth even though she is not accompanied by a man. Molly supports Jack during the dinner and speaks up for the other victims in the water.

According to Lyotard, the capitalist system is “a vanguard machine dragging humanity after it, dehumanizing it.”(Postmodern Condition 63) All knowledge is judged in terms of its financial value and its technological efficiency. The great threat of capitalism is its potential to reduce everything to its own system. Capitalism, he argues, “necessarily entails a certain level of terror: be operational...or disappear.”(Postmodern Condition xxiv) The threat faced by non-efficient knowledge –non-profitable or non-technological – is that it will disappear as it ceases to be supported or respected. Postmodernity is not, however, a condition without hope. Although Lyotard does not propose a new grand narrative to replace those of modernity, he says, “justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect. We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus.”(Postmodern Condition 66) This practice focuses on the individual “little narratives” and their differences from each other, the fact that they are not all reducible to the criterion of efficiency. Once the grand narratives have fallen away, we are left with the diverse range of language games and they must be heard in their own terms. In the movie, the failure of capitalism and the American Dream is hinted by Cal’s suicide after losing all his money in the 1929 Wall Street crash. Christianity too fails to offer solace to humanity as evidenced from Rose’s suicide attempt. Her way back to life was occasioned by the intervention of Jack. The old Rose states, “ ‘but now you know there was a man named Jack Dawson and that he saved me in every way that a person can be saved.’ ”

The destruction of the grand narratives saw the spawning of a multiplicity of ‘little narratives’ or what Lyotard more commonly referred to as language games. Incommensurable with one another, these language games could neither be subsumed by an overarching or totalizing concept such as contradiction nor integrated by processes like Jurgen Habermas’s notion of consensus or Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory. Lyotard is careful to acknowledge that not all social relations are of this type, but he nonetheless insists that language games are the minimum form of social relation. The resulting image of society, which Lyotard terms “realism”, is that of an agonistics or even a polemics in which each language game must compete for legitimacy. Unable to appeal to pre-existing grand narratives for its legitimacy, knowledge now makes do by citing its efficiency and practicality.

Lyotard argues that in a postmodern world, the only form of legitimation will be legitimation by paralogy. The word derived from two Greek words; para (beside, past, beyond) and logos in its sense as "reason." Thus paralogy denotes a movement beyond or against reason. Lyotard reckons reason not as a universal and immutable human faculty or principle but as a specific and variable human production; "paralogy" for him means the movement against an established way of reasoning. Lyotard argues that the systems of knowledge are always being disturbed and that with paralogy “[i]t is necessary to posit the existence of a power that destabilizes the capacity for explanation, manifested in the promulgation of new norms for understanding or, if one prefers, in a proposal to establish new rules circumscribing a new field of research for the language of science.” (Postmodern Condition 61)

Jack and Rose follow this so called false logic. For Patrick McGee, the actual R.M.S Titanic provided one of the “most beautiful expressions” of a class based “fantasy of an order in which everything and every person has their proper place and value without contradiction or conflict- in other words, without the unsolicited intrusions of desire.”(7)Cameron’s film disrupts this fantasy of pan-class comity by using Jack to embody the revolutionary potential of “desires’s subversive play” and by using “the passion of Jack and Rose” to “explode the Titanic as a metaphor of social harmony through natural hierarchy.”(7) According to McGee, Jack’s subversive desire not only points out the flaws in the class system of 1912 but also provides Rose with “a desire that helps to liberate” her “from the enslavement of social demand.”(9) Thus Jack and Rose take recourse to little narratives rather than metanarratives to shape their lives and thereby become the mouthpieces of postmodernism.

IV. CONCLUSION

Postmodernism is heralded by a legitimation crisis in the grand narratives that provided a framework of human understanding. Rather than a futile and totalitarian consensus, Lyotard (the apostle of postmodernism) argues for a spirit of dissensus, insisting on the equality and justice of all localized language games (petit narratives). A language game is a field of discourse defined by a set of internal rules that establish the types of allowable statements. Different discourse practices, such as science and ethics, have become distinct language games, adhering to different sets of rules. Because disparate language games prohibit statements that fail to conform to their rules, it is impossible to give a single, overarching account that would guarantee the legitimacy of all possible discourse practices. For this reason, Lyotard states that the postmodern situation is marked by an “incredulity toward meta-narratives.”(Postmodern Condition xxiv)

The postmodern condition demands a new response to the problem of legitimation. Lyotard claims that the appropriate response to the problem in a society marked by the postmodern condition is "paralogy". In the

practice of paralogy, the goal of producing an overarching legitimation narrative is replaced by an attempt to increase the possible language moves in a particular language game. Hence, paralogy champions the diversity of discourse practices by prohibiting the hegemony of a single discourse over all others.

The inmates of the ship and the crew who drowned into the depths of the Atlantic had different realities. Captain Smith and Bruce Ismay had a profound belief in the scientific technologies used in the construction of the ship and thought that it was "unsinkable". They believed in the grand narrative of scientific modernity. Mr. Cal, Rose's fiancé and other aristocrats in the ship were overwhelmed by the luxuries of the ship and dreamed to make a better future in America. They are the representatives of the capitalist system. There are also the working class men who toil to run the steam engine. These proletariats are the have-nots who were exploited by the bourgeois society. The third class passengers cherished the American Dream. All these metanarratives collapsed as the ship sank and paved way for the emergence of little narratives. The individual narratives were silenced by the overarching narratives as well as death.

Lyotard, taking a cue from the arguments put forward by the French revisionist historian Robert Faurisson about Auschwitz, states that only a survivor can talk authentically about a catastrophe. In this respect Rose is the apt person to render her experiences on the ill-fated ship Titanic. But there are also the untold stories. Lyotard's notion of "differend" becomes relevant here. The differend is a moment of silence, a stutter in the flow of language, where the right words will not come. It marks a point of suffering where an injustice cannot find a space to make itself heard, where an injury is silenced and becomes a wrong. (Malpas 61)

A differend is a case of conflict between parties that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both. In the case of a differend, the parties cannot agree on a rule or criterion by which their dispute might be decided. The personal narratives of the inmates of the ships vary from each other. As the consensus between them is impossible, there will be as many narratives as the inmates of the ship. The aim of the movie is not to effect a "reconciliation between "language games" [petit narratives as]...they are separated by an abyss". (The Postmodern Explained 15) The little narratives are linked to identity. The wider the range of narratives, the more open and pluralist the society will be.

Beyond the authentic account of the tragedy, there is a feeling attached to it -the feeling arising from the wrong. The voices smothered by the metanarratives find articulation with their demise. This is regarded as a radically new form of epistemological freedom, resisting the dominance of overarching patterns which appear to ignore the details and experiences of differences in their effort to construct patterns which make sense of the world on a grand scale.

In The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard argues for a rejection of the search for logically consistent, self-evidently "true" grounds for philosophical discourse and the substitution of ad-hoc tactical manoeuvres as justification for what are quiet often eccentric lines of argument. It is essentially a strategic practice concerned with undermining the philosophical establishment and its commitment to foundationalist principles. Ultimately, Lyotard is suspicious of all claims to proof or truth: "Scientists, technicians and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power". (The Postmodern Condition 46) Beneath apparent objectivity then, lies a buried and dominant discourse of realpolitik: "the exercise of terror" (The Postmodern Condition 64) as Lyotard calls it. Thus legitimation of any sort is always an issue of power; and it is the connection of power and the rhetoric of truth and value which preoccupies Lyotard's study. The tragedy of Titanic cannot be reckoned as a mere event in the continuity of history. It has become one of the "so many signs of the defaillancy of modernity" (The Lyotard Reader 318). History cannot continue normally after this great shipwreck.

Lyotard insists upon the importance of continuing to think and write history in the face of disruption of the grand narratives. Unlike Jameson, he does not propose a return to a particular organising narrative. However, in distinction from Baudrillard, he does not argue a case for the complete disintegration of history. "...the task of the postmodern critic is not to condemn or celebrate some new age following on from the grand narratives of modernity, but to return continually to these events that have shaped contemporary genres of discourse in order to discover in them the voices that have been silenced." (Malpas 80)

An event challenges established genres of discourse and calls for all that has led up to it to be rethought. In many ways, it is the founding moment of any postmodernism. Bill Readings, one of the most incisive commentators on Lyotard's work defines the event in the following manner:

An event is an occurrence as such ... That is to say, the event is the fact or case that something happens, after which nothing will ever be the same again. The event disrupts any pre-existing referential frame within which it might be represented or understood. The eventhood of the event is the radical singularity of happening, the 'it happens' as distinct from the sense of 'what is happening'. (Postmodern Condition xxxi)

For Lyotard, an event consists in the perception of an instant in which something happens to which we are called to respond without knowing in advance the genre in which to respond. In other words, events occur in such a way that pre-established genres are incapable of responding adequately to their singular natures. The event might be something as simple as a painting or a poem or as complex and world-changing as the tragedy of

Titanic. Throughout Lyotard's work the event is what calls for a response, a judgement, which respects its specificity and refuses simply to fit it into a pre-given scheme.

If a work of art can hold within itself the minimal instance of an event, it retains something that is irreducible to systematic comprehension or exploitation. Judged from the perspective of its eventhood, a work of art has the potential to uncover differends submerged in the genres of discourse that shape social life.

James Cameron's Titanic can in many ways be described as a zeitgeist document presenting postmodernist negotiations of romantic love, the popular use of nostalgia and historicism, current concerns of class and economic survival, the encouragement of a general consumerist attitude and the reflection of all these concerns in popular culture. These aspects interact with the Titanic myth, turning Cameron's version into the ultimate postmodernist Titanic tale. There is a strong concern for history and authenticity in the movie. Postmodernism displays an almost celebratory disregard for history. History is old-fashioned. It is the present time alone that counts and after all everything is subjective. Historical fact is denounced as construction (which accordingly must be deconstructed).

There is also another attitude to history in postmodern society that gives importance to the reconstruction and re-enactment of the historical event in question. History can be experienced by meticulous reconstruction, up to the most accurate detail. It is this attitude to history that is typical of postmodernist historical film-and that has been developed unto perfection in Cameron's Titanic. According to Gaylyn Studlar, "Cameron's Titanic is not indicative of a postmodern disregard of history but instead demonstrates the cinematic strategies of a monumental history essential to the classic Hollywood paradigm in its parallelist conception of events and nations." (qtd. in Bergfelder and Street:282)

The total disregard for the metanarratives that features postmodernity is epitomized in the characters of Jack and Rose. These entirely self-reliant lovers miraculously get all the information they need, they do not heed authorities, they find their way through the labyrinth of corridors, they even succeed where the professional in charge failed (namely to unlock the gate that blocks their way under rising water). In her desperate effort to release Jack from his handcuffs, Rose does not receive help from a steward when she, a spoiled first class passenger, urgently asks for it. This underworld scene in the frighteningly deserted corridors, with the light flickering and the ship groaning in its agony, is the actual rite of passage for this fastidious upper class girl: She transforms from a civilized, well-behaved lady to a fierce survivor. Even the love relationship between Jack and Rose does not assume the status of a metanarrative. After Jack's death, she marries another person. Her life is shaped by little narratives as evidenced from the photographs beside the bed of old Rose. The "petit narratives" have become the new epistemology of our times. Titanic possesses a "power that destabilizes the capacity for explanation" (Postmodern Condition 61). The paralogy of "petit narratives" is at work here.

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Dhanya Joy" Paralogy of Petit Narratives: a Lyotardian Reading of James Cameron's Titanic" *Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 07, no. 4, 2019, pp. 31-38