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**POSTMODERN EPISTEMIC TRENDS AND THE DIALECTICS OF NAGARJUNA'S
EPISTEMOLOGY**

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Abstract

The dialectics of Nagarjuna's epistemology and the postmodern epistemic moorings suggest considerable similarities. Nagarjuna's epistemic positions such as *Sunyavada*, the idea of indeterminacy, not void, the debate between absolutism and relativism, understandings or concepts (*nama* and *lakshana*) as mind constructions (*nirmana*), suspension of absolute judgment in the act of knowing (*Sunyata*), non-contentiousness (*anupalambha*) as the way of inquiry or right thinking, his metaphysics coupled with epistemic position namely the idea of *pratityasamudpada*, that everything is relational and only relationality contributes epistemic sensibility etc all stand in strong parallel to the postmodern epistemic positions as well their skeptical claims which include -the *death of subjectivity* and the *erosion of objectivity, incredulity towards meta-narratives, the erosion of the centre/essence as authority of meaning* or the *death of the author, meaning as a matter of simultaneous presence* (co-relationality) etc- all these markedly suggest a strong philosophical sense of epistemological parallels. By bringing together the dialectics of Nagarjunaⁱ of the *Madhyamika* and some of the postmodern epistemic strands the present paper aims not only to defend a case of parallel positioning but all the more to sensitize the social affirmations embedded in both these trends of thought. Moreover, the rich territories of both Buddhism and Postmodernism, I believe, would as well open up further vital research inquires in their dialectics.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Buddhism, epistemology, *Sunyavada*, *nirmana*, *Sunyata*

The validity of human as the Knowing Subject and the claims to certainty of Knowledge in terms of either objectivity or subjectivity intermittent epistemological themes in the last four decades, raised by poststructuralists and postmodern thinkers. Though their cultural politics can either be a rejection of the structures of the modern or the extension of the modern, they probe the profound epistemic inquiry regarding the status and validity of our claims to knowledge.

Differentiating the modern and the postmodern, Jean-François Lyotard says, 'I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse ... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working Subject, or the creation of wealth.'ⁱⁱ For Lyotard, these grand narratives and their claims

to objectivity of knowledge, persist by a process of self-legitimation. But then for Lyotard, 'this is not to suggest that there are no longer any credible narratives at all. By meta-narratives or grand narratives, I mean precisely narrations with a legitimating function.'ⁱⁱⁱ Rejecting these defining narrative structures of modernity, Lyotard announced the *post-modern* age 'as incredulity towards meta-narratives.'^{iv} By contending itself to do away with any totalities of ideologues or truth-claims, the postmodern shifts towards a form of subjectivism, yet not contend with subjectivism as well, for the 'Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy.'^v David Clippinger, of Pennsylvania State University, notes, 'therefore, modernism might best be conceptualized as a field of ideas, styles and concepts to which the postmodern has returned, carried off and transformed, while simultaneously criticizing what it has chosen to transform and leave behind.'^{vi}

Like Lyotard, who pronounces a profound doubt towards modernity, not only as a way of living, but also as a way of knowing, Nagarjuna with in Indian tradition foreshadows similar incredulity towards any overarching theories or truth claims. In times that certain Buddhist scholars made exclusive claims to truth and certainty, Nagarjuna emerges as one of the best dialecticians to warn against any absolute truth claims and alternatively posits his *Sunyavada*, as mode of truth-inquiry and claims, (not a position) against any absolute ontological and epistemic totalities. 'Sunya' for Nagarjuna does not necessarily mean emptiness or void but it posits a relativistic position of indeterminacy as against any grand narrative or theory that encapsulates everything in to the self same oneness a metanarrative to be pronounced a suspension or incredulity. Avoiding the extremities of realism, for instance the epistemic claims of Nyayas, and absolute skepticism, and even total world negations, Nagarjuna takes up a middle way, the way of the Buddha, in his epistemological inquiry. Total grasp or comprehension of reality is never possible and what is possible is a certain sense of (in)/describability, which is only a point of view (*dirishit* or *dhiti*) and what can be said here to some extent is that reality is indescribable (*avacya*), and for Nagarjuna this does not mean any sort of nihilism.

The beginnings of postmodern writings most of them spell out clear versions against the epistemic position that knowledge is purely empirical, scientific, objective and hence vulnerable to rational certainty and technological scrutiny. But it was not immediately clear that the implications of the theory called first 'post-structuralism' and its modification called postmodernism were hostile to subjectivity. Indeed the opposite appeared to be the case. Most postmodernists apparently stimulated with a sense of overriding subjectivity implying a strong rejection to the claims of objectivity. Predominantly postmodern criticism or skepticism was aimed against any singular objective truth be that of scientists and social scientists. Postmodernists in general consider that

truth of modernity is but an exaggerated error. The primacy of reason as a valid means to objectivity strategically established by Descartes, as “cogito ergo sum’ is read as an arching exaggerated error in the language of postmodernists. Richard J. Bernstein deems the foundationalism of modernism as the “iron cages of bureaucratic rationality’ from whose clutches we have yet to break free.^{vii}

Nagarjuna, in the footsteps of his master, Buddha, impel similar opposition to absolute claims of objective rational certainty. He holds that *anupalmbha*, a sense of non-contentiousness to thinking rightly. According to Nagarjuna, the human inherent tendency to cling on to something as absolute, to hold tight to some thing as certain is the root cause of this ‘suffering’, a sickness to truth-claims. Between change and permanency, the human tendency is to embrace the later, and this deviates the human to be dynamic and seek security with in the enslavement of any ideologue or structure as permanent as absolutely true. ‘By seizing the relatively separate as absolute, one will never regain the dynamic, organic relatedness in which richness of life consists.’^{viii} Like that of the postmodern rendering against any objectivity of truth claims, Nagarjuna deems the tendency to absolutism as misplaced absoluteness, an error in human conceptualization of the reality.

What can be seized to be true, for Nagarjuna is the immediate query here. Nagarjuna tentatively and hesitantly defines true knowledge as *dharmanambuhutpyatyaveksah*, meaning that the revelation of indeterminacy as against any form of determinate absolute truth claims is the way of perceiving. But then, for Nagarjuna, indeterminacy is not to be reduced to sense of illusion (Maya) or nothingness. Reality in itself is indeterminate and it calls for a dependency with the other, a sense of openness, a sense of pratitya, or dependent origination, towards understanding and meaningfulness. Here one is reminded of the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure, whose writings ignited the post structuralists and postmodernists. For Saussure, the question of meaningfulness is a matter of arbitrariness, (the indeterminacy of that of Nagarjuna) and relationality in the network of linguistic structure, and as such there is no objective or realist sense of meaningfulness. He writes, ‘In a language, there are only differences, without fixed terms’^{ix}

The concept of *Sunyata* as propounded by Nagarjuna neither affirms pure subjectivity nor objectivity rather it is symbolizes the participatory act pluralistic perception in terms of relations. It is not even a concept to determine something as determinate. It is a symbol an expression that speaks of non-determination. It is literally a sort of emptiness, (not nihilism), a void, that opens the multiple possibilities, outside one’s self-existence, directing towards multifaceted dimensions of representations.^x The postmodernists sensibility to resist any totalities or monopolizations point out similar directions by a mode of deconstruction to restore the differences and particularities as they are in their inter connectedness and in ruptures, which are robbed/straightened within the

imprisonment of objective or subjective truth claims. In *Sunyata*, there is no distinction between the knower and the known, the personal and the impersonal. *Sunyata* proposes a sense of awakening to *dhamma*, to the rhythm of the natural life. Jacques Derrida indicates such intrinsic nature of difference with his own concept of *différance* indicating not only differentiation, but also the deferment of the moment of closure that is definition, and hence the perpetual play of difference. 'Différance is the nonfull, nonsimple, structured and differentiating origin of differences'. The writings of Derrida expose the view that postmodernists do in fact, rejected subjectivity as well objectivity. His method of deconstruction is not only directed towards the objective world also systematically against/jeopardizes subjectivity, namely the primacy of Subject-Self as the author or giver of meaning. Emphasis of differentia, for Derrida implied the differentia of the Subject Self as well.

The postmodern readings suggest a strong sense of non-centeredness, a rejection of any centered author as the meaning-giver. According to them, the perceiving or meaning-giving essential self (The Perceiver or the Supreme perceiver, 'The Gaze' (Foucault) is not devoid of deconstruction-for-difference. The Subject itself is called into question here. Derrida, the difference is not only of the people, or objectivity but also of the Self that differentiates. The difference, or *différance*, comes before the Subject. To ask what or who differs assumes the prior existence of Subjects who differ. Derrida is insisting on the priority of difference over the Subject. The implication is that the Subject, too, cannot be assumed to be a unitary whole without difference, but rather, must in turn, itself be deconstructed.^{xi} The deconstruction of objectivity runs parallel to the deconstruction of subjectivity^{xii}. As objective truth is a narrative so also the subjectivity that assumes the authorship of objectivity is also a social construction, a myth then to be dispensed with. The spirit of the West (Heidegger) as the provider of meaning for the rest of the world is abnegated in the postmodern.

Like the affirmation of non-centeredness of that of the postmodernists, the State of *Sunyata* means, a sense of de-centered existence; *Sunyata* is without any centre. This implies a serious sense of non-anthropocentric appropriation of reality, which amounts to reject the human claim towards appropriation, and thereby exploitation of the vulnerable where in the subject is culturally positioned to the 'grasp' of the object. Within the epistemology of Nagarjuna, in terms of his, *Sunyata*, there is no subject-object grasp. Everything is related in everything else, in a way of *Pratityasamud*. There is neither a perceiver in domination of the perceived to be dominated, which in turn calls for an ethic of emancipation, a sense of freedom or emancipation of any fragile particularities. There is absolute truth claims. It is simply and profoundly a revelation of the 'let be'. The relational is the only determining factor, (the differentia, in the language of Derrida), and being is independent origination in every moment (*prajna* in *ksanica*). This means that one cannot

know anything in isolation or separation. What is known is revealed in the matrix of realities, with in the complexity of causal factors, 'the essentially dependent nature, viz., its dependence on the unconditioned reality.^{xiii} According to Nagarjuna, the determinate reality and the indeterminate reality are not two separate entities: the indeterminate reality is nothing but the ultimate nature of the determinate reality.^{xiv} Becoming aware of the absurdities and self-contradictions is the way to *Nirvana*, held by Nagarjuna. Thus like the postmodern sensibility against forms of *eidos*, or *arche*, Nagarjuna did not allow himself to be confined to any singular epistemic position, but he let himself in the flow of knowing the differentia view points in a mode of dialectics. The *Madhyamika* system names this position as *Prajna*, which means to be devoid of any singular narrative or 'episteme', a way to rise above all forms of exclusiveness. As Nagarjuna says, in the *Karika*, "Everything" holds good in the case of the one who is in agreement with *Sunyata*."^{xv} Like the postmodern claim that truth is socially construed or context, conditioned, Nagarjuna claims, "The ultimate truth cannot be taught except in the context of the mundane truth, and unless ... (this) is comprehended, *Nirvana* cannot be realized."^{xvi} Like the postmodern position that every reality is specific and particular, and there is no any generalizations, Nagarjuna, holds that 'every theory is specific and being specific they are limited and conditioned and no view, being a view, is ultimate.^{xvii} *Drishti* meaning an epistemic view point, can not be held to be absolutely true for Nagarjuna, as holds that, "*Sunyata* has been taught as a remedy for all *drishtis*. But they indeed are all incurable who cling (to any singular truth) and turn *Sunyata* itself into a *drishti*."^{xviii}

Dialectics for Nagarjuna and Deconstruction for Derrida

Like Derrida who was against any system-building, who favored, 'the death of the author' by a mode of deconstruction, Nagarjuna by refraining himself from any system building or singular philosophical position, he severely criticizes every system that pretended to be the final, over arching grand narrative of ultimate truth. Derrida, while considering, western philosophy, as a totality, a metaphysics of presence, supported a series of founding concepts or centers, that each one hoped to rule or dominate other systems of thought, by remaining unsullied promoted a sense and practice of domination. He says, "Successively, and in regulated fashion, the center receives different forms or names. The history of metaphysics like the history of the West is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix is the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word. It could be shown that all the names related fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence - *eidos*, *arche*, *telos*, *energia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man and so forth."^{xix} Deconstruction for Derrida (dialectics for Nagarjuna) begins by identifying the centre of a system, or the privileged term in a violent conceptual hierarchy

and represents an intervention to make that system or hierarchy tremble. Similarly, for Nagarjuna, dialectics is the way of exposing the exclusiveness of any truth claims to a moment of fragility in order that Sunyata is revealed as non-exclusiveness and non-inclusiveness (total comprehension or appropriation) as against any *Nama* or *lakshana*, the conceptual constructions of realities.

The notion of *Pratityasamutpada* is in tune with *Sunyata* of Nagarjuna. *Pratityasamutpada* literally translated as dependent origination implies a serious sense of meaningfulness (an emptiness, a rupture, an opening for mutual presences in interrelatedness) in terms of inter-dependency. That meaning is not traced from pure essence or empirical or factual representation, meaning lies in an in-between, the middle way, in the matrix of pluralistic mutuality. Taking clue from the structuralists' readings, Derrida, in the similar way, holds that, "Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each 'element' -phoneme or grapheme - being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving, this textile, is the text produced only in the transformation of another text. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces."^{xx} In the same manner, Nagarjuna interpreting Sunyata as interrelatedness holds that nothing exists on its own. Every existence is in a sense limited or empty (*sunyat*) calling for the other reality in a fabric of relationship. Monopolizing reality monistic or dualistic manner is then a form of restriction to the boundless and ever enfolding nature of reality. Difference, for Derrida, 'is at the origin of all ethics as of all would-be centers. It is the *spatialization* and *temporalisation* which precede all centers, all concepts and all reality, making these things possible'^{xxi} by difference and deference. Similarly, 'In Sunyata, there is the possibility of just interpenetration and the mutual reversibility of all things in a reciprocal manner.'^{xxii}

The hostility of the postmodernists against objectivity and subjectivity I hold has a positive significance, an affirmative standpoint to engage into a pronouncement of an erosion of these in order to restore the views/realities that have been subjected or subjugated by them. The postmodernist's incredulity towards metanarratives is simultaneously tied with the objection and opposition to totalitarianism, territorial geopolitics of the late modern age of the powerful nations, to forms of discriminations be that of racial or fascist, to primacy of one moral claim as against the other, to technocratic domination, to economic globalization etc. The positions of Nagarjuna and that of the Postmodernists' do open up opportunities to deconstruct the disabling ideological, social and political centric-constructions, the enslaving systems and alternatively reconstruct anew, powerful identities in favor of those who have been subjugated by the alienating systems of both tradition and modernity. In practical terms, this would mean that both

Nagarjuna (Buddhist sensibility) and the affirmative postmodern contest/resist for a space/site for the emancipation of the engendered. The warning here is that the ideological imprisonments often produce social slavery. The subject that is produced/construed by social constructions - an ideology, in turn assumes the role of a master meaning giver, and loses the very ground of conscience and thereby assumes a sense of domination over and against the Other. Louis Althusser a colleague of Foucault and Derrida, in his essay on 'Ideological state apparatuses' (1970), argues that 'ideology has the function of "constituting" concrete individuals as subjects'^{xxiii}. Derrida's deconstructing of the western metaphysics of presence as Subject-Self, is aimed at the downfall of the alleged 'enlightenment rationality of modernity, the Spirit of the West scientific and political meaning giver. Lyotard's pronouncement of incredulity towards grand-narratives is remains a prophetic caution against the alleged promise of progress and happiness mediated purely by the technocratic centre. The equation of knowledge and Power, by Foucault, is a resistance voice against matrix of power relations practiced in the late modern society. Similarly the position of Nagarjuna in terms of *Sunayata*, *Pratitya*, and *Nivana* etc, reveal a strong sense of theoretical and practical resistance to forms of knowledge/power and cultural dominations and thereby disable them by pointing out their limitations, and enable a sense of an ethic of responsibility towards the Other, and celebrate the differentia without annihilations of the vulnerable forms of life.

By tracing the Western notion of Being as the Centre-Self predicated of domination the postmodernist contrasts it with the non-centre, the periphery constituted by the very system that construed the centre-self. The dominant self of the centre by specific modes of domination persists its primacy by a process of exclusion of the Other, the vulnerable ones and this compels the ethical imperative to engage a philosophy mutual presence. 'A philosophy of resistance is to approach to a reality of a despised category, namely the despised-other, as a historically deprived category in the vistas of constructions of knowledge. It is to advance toward origination origin, toward the very foundations/archeology of metaphysical/epistemological/ethical discourse without losing sight of the emotional, pathological historical sense of subjectivity in relation. Such advancement is possible only by pronouncing the death of a certain and simultaneously announcing the birth of a philosophy of social emancipation proper. The politics of a philosophy of resistance is to reestablish the stolen territory of those who have been systematically reduced as objects for knowledge/power manipulations. The ethos of resistance (dialectics/deconstruction) for restoration of interconnectedness is then historical, political and philosophical inquiry with a specific sense of ethics, namely a discriminatory sense of ethics to discriminate, that which discriminates and to negate (*Sunyat*) that which negates or subdues. Its aesthetics is to place oneself in proximate and liberating relationship with the Other.

Notes

1. ⁱ A Buddhist monk and exponent par excellence of Buddhism, whose philosophical treatise is called, *Madhyamaka-Sastra*, said to have lived in second century A.D and taught at Nalanda.
2. ⁱⁱ *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester: University Press, 1989) , pXXIV
3. ⁱⁱⁱ Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained* p. 19.
4. ^{iv} *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester: University Press, 1989), pXXIV
5. ^v *Jean Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Explained*, p. xxv
6. ^{vi} Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winqvist (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, (London: Routledge, 2001), “Modernism” , p. 252.
7. ^{vii} Reference here is to Rene Descartes, ‘*Discourse on Method*’, found in Part - I, translated by Desbruslais, p. 1117.
8. ^{viii} Nagarjuna, *Madhymika-karika*, xxiv, p.36, 38.
9. ^{ix} Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. Wade Baskin), London, Fontana/Collins, 1981, p.120.
10. ^x Roger Coreless and Paul F. Knitter (edis.), *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), p.53.
11. ^{xi} Jacques Derrida, *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1991, p64 - 65).
12. ^{xii} *Of Grammatology*, Maryland: John Hopkins UP, 1997, p16
13. ^{xiii} R. Venkat Ramanan, *Nagarjuna’s Philosophy*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), ch.9
14. ^{xiv} Nagarjuna, *Madhymika-karika*, xxv, 9.
15. ^{xv} Nagarjuna, *Madhymika-karika*, xxiv, 14.
16. ^{xvi} Nagarjuna, *Madhymika-karika*, xxiv, 10.
17. ^{xvii} Nagarjuna, *Madhymika-karika*,xxiv, 30.
18. ^{xviii} Nagarjuna, *Madhymika-karika*,xiii, 8.
19. ^{xix} Jacques Deriida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans, Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 40.
20. ^{xx} Bennington, Geoffrey, and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993) p. 58.
21. ^{xxi} Jon Simons (ed.), *contemporary Critical Theoriests - From Lacan to Said*,(Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 88.
22. ^{xxii} Pchalakkatt Binoy, *Dialoguing with Symbols*, (Omega, Indian Journal of Science and Religion, vol. 5, Dec. 2006) pp. 29-32
23. ^{xxiii} ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’, in Slavoj Zizek (ed), *Mapping Ideology*, London: Verso, 1994, p128-129.