

## Problem of Objectivity in History and Historiography: The Study of Hayden White

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### ABSTRACT

There is unanimity among historiographers that history is the reconstruction of the past which depends upon the historians, the past events and the facts and their interpretation. A historian starts to reconstruct the past events and thinks to be objective then problems begin. The social scientist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century especially the relativists historian's complete objectivity is possible. Historians are also part of this world and their imagination and writings certainly are the result of the same. A social scientist's ideological, cultural and intellectual inclinations limit the extent of objectivity. The question arises here that if total objectivity is not possible then is it worthless to pursue objectivity. It is true that it is not possible the complete reconstruction of past but partial reconstruction can be achieved. What the forms of writing history and features such Annals, Chronicles etc.? How to reconstruct the past events impartially? What is history with objectivity? What are the methods of representation of the past? Is it possible to write an objective narrative in a limited sense? The article tries to find out answer to these questions.

**Keywords:** Objectivity, Annals, Chronicles, Hayden White, historiography, historical facts

The aim of total objectivity is the foundation of history and other social science disciplines. The complete, true and objective reconstruction of the past started in the West right since the days of Herodotus. The early Indian historians and historical works either did not follow the path of objective narrative or they were above the objectivity. If we believe in Thomas Haskell,<sup>i</sup> we can also say that early Indian historians and writers had another kind of objectivity i.e. strong devotion to God or king. They wrote passionately for either king or God and did not care about anything except their subject. interests of Peter Novick says that "an objective narration is the mirror of the past achieved through the separation of the object and the subject, the fact and the interpretation, the history and the fiction and the knower and the known. Truth cannot be altered since it is one. Historical facts are independent from interpretation but both depends upon each other for a complete history. Historical facts are God for an objective historian, who has to be an impartial person, an unbiased professional and a neutral judge."<sup>ii</sup> There are several methods for the representation of the past; the basic problem is to be objective for a given representation of the past. It is the ultimate goal of every historian. It opens an intense debate about whether history can be objective. Some scholars out rightly reject the possibility of history as an objective social science. On the other hand, there are some historians who accept the possibility of a limited objectivity in history, which can be achieved by scientific methods. There is a need to look into the possibility of objectivity in a historical study. Passmore<sup>iii</sup> identified seven criteria/standards to decide an objective inquiry:

1. With conclusions from self-evident axioms.
2. With data which are literal truth.
3. Direct examination of the world.
4. Without personal expressions
5. With a focus on facts.
6. Without from within the material.
7. With a method of.

Objectivity is something that emerges from the framework of the realism, objectivism, scientific and naturalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. German historian Ranke for the first time in the first quarter of the nineteenth century argued that an objective history is possible with the best judgment. It is not true that Ranke started the movement of writing objective history but was already in practice since the time of Herodotus itself through critical analysis.<sup>iv</sup> Objectivity is a temporal concept, which is developing and changing as per time and region. In

medieval and modern history, objectivity has been a monolithic and immutable concept which is rarely visible and different from our conception. Because the knowing subject and the known subject supposed to merge together and truly real objects were ideas in the divine mind. Facts can no longer be regarded as the clear cut invariable impersonal entities which they were once thought to be. And knower is inextricably involved in the facts he recognizes. His personal bias is always a factor in his conclusion. It was a time when historians belonged to an age of innocence that made history problematic.

Now days, objectivity has different connotations in different field of knowledge. Its value changes according to our style. We think objectivity as a method of enquiry, which is also relevant for our article, we can give an initial generic definition. It is not reasonable to compare history with the natural sciences, a total unbiasedness from the studied object.<sup>v</sup> We may suggest "over-personal control" means anything is objective if it is over-personal or over individual and if it exerts some kind of control.<sup>vi</sup> In this way, an investigator should maintain three senses of objectivity viz. method, scientific, and behavioural to give the objective status to his investigation. For this he has to lift himself from the status of a general man. First investigator expresses facts without distortion from bias and includes personal wishes and desire. Second, the investigator keeps him scientifically disinterested, detached and aloof from the fact and relations being investigate. Hayden white has special concern with scientific objectivity when he proves that narrative history or even history does not have scientific objectivity. Finally, the investigator's investigation should be observable, testable and verifiable in shot to facts. In this sense objectivity not only signifies the impartiality and detachment of the inquirer but also marks off a definite area of subject matter where facts are alleged to be tested."<sup>vii</sup>

The historian is an important factor in the objective history. His hypothesis, sense, unconscious and conscious biases, techniques and synthesis are deciders of his writing as objective. In this way, the question of the secure foundation and assumption that there is an objective basis of truth, there is a fact that historian can see and establish to make truth claims and verify the claims we make is hugely problematic but if that past is what we make of it and imagine it then how do we verify our knowledge by referring to because that itself is affected by our paradigms. Becker says that "a complete detachment would produce few histories, and none worthwhile, for the really detached mind is a dead mind."<sup>viii</sup> What we discover in the past is not something that inheres in the past but what we see in the past, how we represent the past, how we read the past and that involves a whole set of strategy and functions. Thus, we are creating it and validating it.

Like E. H. Carr, Hayden White and other true formalist historians believe that objectivity cannot invest in the writings of history on the basis of his study of medieval materials. Historians cannot talk in the words of complete and whole truth. For him the objectivity as content is not a big issue compare to the subjective writing style as a form. The same facts can be connected in the different ways of the form which gives the different meaning; we cannot talk of the fact as existing outside the story. In this way, they widely discuss the differences between the methods of history writings such as Annals, Chronicle and Perfect History (Narrative). Then he concludes that if there is only question of objectivity in historiography then Chronicle and Annals are good case those do not have narrative except realism.<sup>ix</sup> These have no central subject, no beginning, middle or end, no evident principle of selection, no connections, no indication of the relative importance of events in short no narrative. In Annals, we have the list of dates (left side) as the signified of which the events given in the right-hand column are the signifiers.

In the sense of a structure of relationship by which the events contained of the account are endowed with a meaning by being identified as parts of an integrated whole. Although neither the structure of the Annals, the causal relationships, the meaning nor the integrated whole are intelligible, no pattern is accessible to a reader's decoding, the list of dates itself is alleged to furnish the necessary coherence and the meaning of the events is their registration in this kind of list which reflect reality. White presents the rudimentary Annals form with its gaps and minimalist notion as the very exemplar of what history might look like if we had the existential nerve to confront the desire and dread which motivate truth claiming narrative.<sup>x</sup> In this way using chronology as the central organizing principle of representation both realistic and narrative in structure, called the chronicle tried to fill the gap. It is superior to the Annals form, in its great comprehensiveness, its organization of materials, its greater narrative coherency but less than a fully realized history. The chronicle like the Annals but unlike the history does not so much conclude as simply terminate, typically it lacks closure, that summing up of the meaning of the chain of events with which it deals that we normally expect from the well-made story.<sup>xi</sup>

Again, Hayden White argues that when we want to represent the past in interesting way in story type to give a coherence unity and meaning to the past events then the narrative form come across which is so natural to human consciousness but the subject of extraordinarily intense debate as we know the historian is the product of his contemporary time, social and cultural situation. So, they imposed his value, morality and ideas on the past events while explaining them and ignored the exact past situation. Here he is giving objectivity a problematic status which does not seems so. Since a historian's degree of attachment to these things depends upon his research method and skillfulness in observing facts, which develops according to time. That is why E. H. Carr argues that the historian of 21<sup>st</sup> century is more objective than the historian of 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>xii</sup>

White has tried to understand the structure of narration through which he analyses and argues that we

make sense of the past through pre-given plot structures existing within society. The corpus that exists within us at a certain time allows us a space, a choice within a certain time and that plot structure gives meaning to what we say. He demonstrates this argument through historical narrative. In narrative plot reality wears a face of regularity order and coherence because the reality itself wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness. It leaves no room for narrator presenting an aspect of much wholeness and completeness of truth.<sup>xiii</sup>

White insists that every narrative concludes only in a moralistic way otherwise reality itself disappears in other order of ending. Because the events that are actually recorded in the narrative appear to be real precisely in so far as they belong to an order of moral existence just as they desire their meaning. So where moral sensitivity is lacking (in the Annals) or is only potentially present (in the Chronicle) not only meaning of narrative but also normativity appears to be lacking. We can sure that moralizing impulse is present too where is any account of real narrative. This moralistic ending keeps narrative from meeting the standard of a modern objective historical account. But White never presents that what does he mean by morality? And what extent the narrators impose morality on the narration? Because the serious historian are who recognizes the historically conditioned, character of all morals and values not the one who claims for. In other words, nature of narrative rejects the nature of culture and the nature of humanity. Then the objectivity of that representation becomes questionable. It means historians do not have to report their truths about the real world in narrative form.<sup>xiv</sup> The past world can be present without giving a narrative account of the history of objectivity itself and only modern historiographical community who have made narrativity into a value, the presence of which in a discourse having to do with real events signals at once its objectivity, its seriousness and its realism.<sup>xv</sup>

Narrative as a complex linguistic form always in the end consummates its irresistible attraction to coherence, connectivity and meaning strapped in the arms of law, legality, state and authority. The subject of history is a citizen subject because the narrator lives in a social system that governed by law conflicts, tension etc. Again, every historical narrative has, as its manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events of which it treats that is to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality. These arguments of White, seems to be ironic and narrow view about narrative. He ignores the duty of historian to come up from these situations in narration, which provide objectivity to his representation. His own values and morals are beyond objective history, which reflects his methodical objectivity.<sup>xvi</sup> It totally depends on historians to how much morality we purpose to allocate to whom and up to what extent. So, the objectivity of narrative depends upon the historian not on the past events.

The production of meaning of any narratives depends upon on the recognition of different forms of the narrative such as epic, romance, tragedy, or comedy. Because any given set of real events can be plotted in a number of ways being told as a number of different kinds of stories. This is why narrative history cannot regard as objective account of events. However, the contemporary historiographers stress that every narrative carries a message to reader about an event. Here White argues that narrative is only a medium to convey the message having no more truth value or information, content than any other formal structures.<sup>xvii</sup> But it is an essential feature of the narrative to communicate between reader and narrator otherwise it will hear a dear, narrative which may be suitable for God who will get some meaning. It is also amazing that how can one give any message without proving that by certain information by a formal structure.

Furthermore, Hayden White emphasized that History and fiction are not so different because a narrative account is always a figurative account and an allegory. The real world actually is constituted in the act of creating fictional narratives because it has a fictive coherence. Because we are dependent of figurative language for narrativisation and that use makes our narrative a poetic narrative. It is a fictive construct to trace back the teleology, the tale of rationality and reason. If we are talking about History as Knowledge then we must realize that both history and fiction are actually processor of knowledge that teach us about the past and help us to enter the past in different ways. The real dangers to knowledge are mechanical objectivity, truth-to-nature, and trained judgement and here history shows their rationale and swims in the ocean of data.<sup>xviii</sup>

The focus on narrative in all its aspects structural, epistemological and cultural as primary, with truth claim or disclaim (alias history or fiction) as secondary differentials of what the mind does with language. White's work on large scale trope structures, on narrative forms work together harmoniously mutually reinforcing and deepening our understanding of how and why western culture is constructed around the tension of objective narratives. Both history and fiction share certain similarities but also differences. Both claims to relate to the real past. The past that history refers to is a past that has actually happened. It is a work of historical reconstruction not a construction while it can be a construction for the fiction writer. By this movement we make a certain claim to corresponding to what the past was. The truth claim is that it is analogous- it is no wonder that the theory of such a complex behaviour of inventing words and gestures for non-existent characters participates in a certain slippage. Certainly, in the course of constructive a narrative involved filtering activity through a standard of very similitude derived from realist fiction and finding reality in need of repair.

### **Conclusion**

It is to conclude that objectivity lies in Annals and Chronicles are modern form of discourse compared to the medieval forms of discourse i.e. narrative. The total copy of past can be an objective historical narrative.

Such a conclusion possibly arrived on the basis of the medieval period's flatter study materials. Is it possible in the modern days when a mammoth of data available for the reconstruction of the history? We have to understand this phenomenon by looking at narratives in much more specific ways. It is not that a historical narrative has a structure that is being imposed on a reality but even reality has structures where at all times, sense is being made to the world. The history is a kind of complex prose that encrypts truth claiming to reach everyone. It deploys the formal resource of language to create intelligible and logically connected events seemed to me the what history is an artifact of language. In other words, a social scientist with awareness of ideological, social, religious and cultural orientations has options to choose sources, structure and language for his narratives. It is almost impossible for social scientists to completely forget the identity and orientations and completely lost into the past for an objective narrative. We comprehend and learn about the universe through language, which is the product of our ancestors and contemporary. Also being a conscious human, every writer thinks and writes in his own ways as per IQ levels and every narrative becomes different in this sense. It is almost impossible to choose the best suitable objective language. The available sources became multiple now a days but these are also products of a biased humans. These problems, challenges, limitations and critics make the 19<sup>th</sup> century's Wilhelm Ranke and other historians like White's claim of achieved objectivity very subjective. Ranke's total objectivity seems impossible to get but historians can achieve limited objectivity through the adoption of scientific methods. The scientific methods decrease the impacts of social, religious, cultural, ideological, linguistic, humanitarian and source-based limitations up to an extent helpful to achieve a limited objectivity in history and other social sciences instead of total objectivity. The current trends in social science researches show that professionals accepting widely a middle path i.e. a limited objectivity in between a total objectivity and no objectivity.

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<sup>i</sup> Thomas L. Haskell, "Objectivity is not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice in Peter Novick's that Noble Dream" *History and Theory* Vol. 29, No.2, 1990, pp. 129-157.

<sup>ii</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity question and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp.1-2.

<sup>iii</sup> J. A. Passmore, "The Objectivity of History," *The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 125, April 1958, pp. 97-111.

<sup>iv</sup> T. S. Brown, "Herodotus and his Profession," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 59, No. 4, 1954, pp.829-833.

<sup>v</sup> K. Anbalakan, "Objectivity in History: An Analysis," *Kemanusiaan*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2016, pp. 21-33

<sup>vi</sup> Donald Walhout, "Objectivity and Value" *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 50, No. 10 (May, 1953), p. 285.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid, p. 290.

<sup>viii</sup> C. L. Becker, "Detachment and the Writing of History," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1910, p. 524-536.

<sup>ix</sup> Hayden White, *The Contents of the Form*, The John Hopking Press, Baltimore, 1987, p.25

<sup>x</sup> Ibid, p.9.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid, p.16

<sup>xii</sup> E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, Penguin Publishers, London, 1961, p.122

<sup>xiii</sup> Hayden White, *The Contents of the Form*, The John Hopking Press, Baltimore, 1987, p.21.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid, p. 02.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid, p.24.

<sup>xvi</sup> E. H. Car, *What is History?*, Penguin Publishers, London, 1961, p.84.

<sup>xvii</sup> Hayden White, *The Contents of the Form*, The John Hopking Press, Baltimore, 1987, p.44

<sup>xviii</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Gallson, *Objectivity*, Zone Books, New York, 2007, pp. 376-377