

*Review*

# The predicaments of the “Grand narrative” of Ethiopian history: The challenges of post modernism

Dagmawie Tesfaye

Department of History and Heritage Management, College of social Sciences, Arsi University, Bishoftu, Ethiopia.

Received 17 January, 2019; Accepted 8 February, 2019

The shadow of skepticism that post –modernist casted on the Meta narrative is so encompassing that it led to conspicuous cynicism on the objectivity of history as a scientific discipline. This article raises this issue by discussing and analyzing the arguments of Samir Yusuf; a post-modernist critique of Bahiru Zewdie’s *A history of modern Ethiopia*. The research, using such analytical tools as the “grand narrative”, has attempted to reveal the essence post -modernist arguments discursively. It has also employed a comparative analysis and found out great resemblance with the critique of Ibadan school of History. Based on its findings, it argues that the application of the postmodern critics to the “grand narrative” of Ethiopian history, as in Samr’s argument, is detrimental for it fails to take into account the peculiarities of Ethiopian history and historiography.

**Key words:** Grand narrative, post modernism, Ethiopian history, historiography, Ibadan.

## INTRODUCTION

A cursory review of a spate of recent publications on Ethiopian historiography reveals the juxtaposing of Ethno history with the grand narrative vying for attention or readership. In this regard , post modernism seems to have provided a perfect ideological tool for the rise of alternative narratives that seem to have taken the grand narrative obsolete perhaps for its own strategic reasons, for granted, that it cares less for continuity, harmony or accord with the prevailing narrative. This study attempts to describe the challenge posed by post- modernist arguments, on the grand narrative of Ethiopian history. The former aversion to grand theories or narratives has made it a perfect ideological or philosophical weapon for attacking and destabilizing the nationalist historiography by ethno- nationalists. The major objective of this study is

to demonstrate the danger lurking behind the application of the post -modernist argument for Ethiopian history.

### **Objectivity and form in History: From E. H. Carr to post modernism**

The Rankean revolution of the nineteenth century emphasized on methodologies and techniques necessary to make written history as objective as possible for it was in the effort to achieve objectivity to limit the personal biases and prejudices of the historian that the scientific nature of history was deemed to lie.

However, in the 1930s, the two American historians namely, Charles A. Beard and Carl L. Becker argued that

E-mail: [dagmawietesfayehistory@gmail.com](mailto:dagmawietesfayehistory@gmail.com).

Author(s) agree that this article remain permanently open access under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

subjective influences are inescapable or pervasive and hence the possibility of attaining objectivity, in historical study is dubious. E. H. Carr contended that an historian can attain objectivity by minimizing objectivity and rising above his or her immediate situation (Evans, 1998:361-362) whereas Peter Novick, in his widely read book. *That Noble Dream* argued that objectivity in history is a delusion and confused concept or chimera (Novick, 1998). The debate that was provoked by Novak's book did not wear down the belief on the objectivity of history as an ideal and hence professionals continued to owe allegiance to it as a regulatory principle. Hence, G. R. Elton's book, *The practice of history* is a sheer defense of history as an objective discipline (Elton, 1967).

Regarding the Form of history, E. H. Carr stated that "all history is teleological "or history is history if only tied to a meta narrative. He insists that objectivity in history is to be sought not by detailing on specific facts but deciphering patterns of processes or interconnectedness of events and looking for "a greater meaning within history itself-as an ongoing history moving from past through present to future." He also identifies Meta narrative as a form of history that permits greater degree of objectivity. Similarly, Elton argues that any serious historical work should have a narrative of political events at its core (Carr, 2002: 60).

### **Modernism and its faith on the Meta narrative**

The term "grand narrative" or "master narrative" was introduced, into the historiographic literature, by Jean-François Lyotard in his classic work (Lyotard, 1979). The concept of *grand narrative*, and in particular, what Lyotard coined as "emancipation narrative" is a kind of *meta-narrative* that tries to identify interconnection between events, and inner connection between events related to one another, a succession of social systems, the gradual development of social conditions. The faith of modernism in "Grand Theory" and master narrative of progress through science and technology and sense of unified identity had served to increase the popularity of Meta narrative until it was put to test by post modernism.

### **Postmodernism and its Criticism of the "grand narratives": Global context**

The term postmodernism "was introduced into the philosophical lexicon, with the publication of Jean-François Lyotard's seminal book *-The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Evans, 1998: 503). Lyotard characterizes post modernism as an era witnessing the "death" of centers" and of displaying "incredulity towards met narratives." Post modernists are general cynical about the "Grand narratives" or meta narratives of historians –such as the slave trade or colonialism and, the most they intend to concede is the

arrangement of the past into a multiplicity of stories, just as individual texts are open to a plurality of read (Tosh 2010, 198

In other words, postmodern views of history and national identity defy a commitment to modern "master narratives" or "meta narratives" like progress and goal-directed history, and disrupt myths of national and ethnic identities as "natural" foundations of "unity."

According to Bahru (2000), in the postmodern period the focus of history has changed from what is known as meta history or the grand historical narrative or even philosophy of history to micro history (the life of commoners in localized settings) Bahru, 2000; 2. The postmodern challenge has had a significant impact on historical thought and writing. According to Iggers (1997), the postmodern critique is valid on certain points. For instance, it has demonstrated that the notion of a unitary history was untenable that history was marked not only by continuity but also by ruptures. The critics rightly point to the ideological assumption that has been embedded in the dominant discourse of professional historical scholarship. They also rightly challenge its exaggerated claims of speaking with authority of experts (George, 1997: 13). In this regard, the most powerful challenge to meta narrative or grand narrative was authored by White (1973: 37).

### **Postmodern challenges to The "Grand narrative": The Ethiopian context**

An instance of postmodern challenge to the grand narrative, in Ethiopian historiography would be Semir (2009a) article "*The Politics of Historizing: a postmodern commentary on Bahru Zewde's History of Modern Ethiopia*" (Semir, 2009: 381-385).

In this article Semir identifies Bahiru' Zewde's book entitled *A History of modern Ethiopia 1855-1991*, (Bahru' Zewde, 2002: 381) as a typical "grand narrative "or a nationalist historiography and criticizes its form and content invoking intertextuality and essentialism. The former refers to the shaping of a text meaning by another text<sup>1</sup> whereas the latter represents the belief that essence is prior to existence. However, more recent post structuralist theory reexamines "intertextuality as a production within texts rather than a series of relationships between different texts.

Semir also poses challenge to not only to the modernist objective historiography but the nationalist historiography. The latter argument owes its stance largely to Semir (2007) master's thesis entitled the "Ethiopian Nation State and contending nationalism in a global era." Samir's philosophical stance and historiographic orientations is also well reflected in Semir (2009b)'s review of Saheed A. Adejumobi's book, *The History of Ethiopia* (Adejumobi, 2007).

<sup>1</sup>The theoretical concept of intertextuality is associated with post modernism.

Interestingly, the title of Samir's article, "the politics of history" relates to the classical criticism of the Ibadan school of History which also includes glorification of the state system, promoting political history, favoring states with centralized system at the expense of those without, worshiping kings and empire builders, promoting elitist view to the neglect of those of the mass (Falola, 2000: 432). Some of these criticisms are valid. There is a striking similarity between the criticism of the Ibadan school of History and the postmodern challenge on the grand narrative. Falola admits that there are many criticisms made of the pursuit of the nationalist history not least by historians who questions both the value and validity. This includes identifying the national historiography as absolute, and of "no practical value to the people."

In 1973, Afigbo wrote about the "poverty of African historiography whereas Terence Ranger, pioneer of the Dar-es-Salaam school of history, identified a crisis in African historiography and pleaded for a "usable" historiography (Falola, 2000: 432). Samir, like Peter Ekeh and John Peel, raises themes like colonialism and politicizing of history and criticizes the nationalist historiography as represented by Bahiru's *A History of modern Ethiopia 1855-1991* (Semir, 2009a: 382).

### **The pitfalls of the postmodernist challenges: In defense of the grand narrative**

According to Lyotard (1979), in the postmodern period, people *no longer believe* in grand narratives, for the disciples of postmodern "grand narratives" are old fashioned and "oppressive" because one grand narrative excludes another and doesn't *my* narrative have just as much right to truth as yours? The contradiction in all this is that this narrative about narratives is itself a grand narrative of the first order, with the narrative of narratives from ancient to feudal to modern times and up to the present. Lyotard (1979), indicating the danger lurking behind the post-modernist approach wrote that:

Post modernism is "incredulity towards meta narrative." This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences. But that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the meta narrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it.

The narrative function is losing its functor, 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 [...] where, after the meta narratives, can legitimacy reside? (Lyotard, 1979: 68).

On his part, Jenkins (2005) contends that all historical accounts have to involve part-to-whole or whole-to-part relationships, to be meaningful (Keith, 2005: 19-20). This

is mainly due to the inevitable troping of parts-to-whole and whole-to-parts. Then, all historical accounts will ultimately be metaphorical and thus Meta-historical owing to their inescapable troping. Jenkins citing White states that, accounts involving metonymic or synecdochel tropes could be meaningful ((Keith, 2005). The "grand narrative" is all those conceptions that try to make sense of history, rather than just isolated events in history and hence maintaining it proves. The post modernists attack on notion of objectivity and scientific method has blurred not only the distinction between historical and fictional narrative but leveled the boarders between honest scholarship and propaganda.

The criticism on the grand narrative invoking the untenability of national historiography on contemporary Ethiopia is not viable due to the objective condition in the country namely the presence of multi ethnic society. While, European countries have achieved impressive level of homogeneity and consensus and hence can afford to say that they no longer need nationalist historiography or the grand narratives, those African countries that are blessed with ethnic diversity with latent centrifugal stances cannot.

Hence, the application of the postmodern critic to the grand narrative of Ethiopian history in particular, could prove harmful than help Africans understand their history or provide a chance for a better understanding of their history. This is because of its unique historiographic traditions and ethnographic reality.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

The authors has not declared any conflict of interests.

### **REFERENCES**

- Adejumobi SA (2007). *The History of Ethiopia*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Bahru' Zewde A (2002). *History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991*. Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa.
- Bahru Zewde A (2000). *Century of Ethiopian Historiography*. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 33(2).
- Carr EH (2002). *What is History?*. Palgrave Macmillan; Revised Edition.
- Evans RJ (1998). *In defense of History*. W.W. Norton and Company: New York.
- Elton GR (1967) *The Practice of History*. Fontana Books. Sydney.
- Falola T (2000). *Tradition and change in Africa: The essays of J.F. Ade Ajayi*. Africa world Press, Asmara.
- George G (1997). *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to Postmodern Challenge*. Wesleyan University Press, Middletown.
- Lyotard J-F (1979). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Vol. 10). U of Minnesota Press.
- Keith J (2005). On "What is History?". From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White. *Rutledge*.
- Novick P (1988) *hat noble Dream: The objectivity Question and the American Historical profession* Cambridge.
- Semir Y (2007). *The Ethiopian Nation State and contending nationalism in a global era*. Master thesis, Addis Ababa University, AddisAbaba.
- Semir Y (2009a). *The politics of Historing: A postmodern commentary*

on BahruZewde's History of Modern Ethiopia, African Journal of Political Science and International Relations 3(9).  
Semir Y (2009b). Book review -Saheed A. Adejumobi, The History of Ethiopia "inIdentity, Culture and Politics:An Afro Asian dialogue 10(1).  
Tosh J (2010).The Pursuit of History, 5th eds. Longman.  
[https://archive.org/stream/91288819ToshPursuitOfHistory5thEd/91288819-Tosh-Pursuit-of-History-5th-Ed\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/91288819ToshPursuitOfHistory5thEd/91288819-Tosh-Pursuit-of-History-5th-Ed_djvu.txt)

White H (1973). Meta history: The historical imagination in the 19<sup>th</sup> C, Johns Hopkin University, Baltimore. White Hayden. )The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.  
<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=acls;cc=acls;view=toc;idno=heb04928.0001.001>