# Munslow: On History as a Postmodern Literary Activity

In the article, “What History Is,” Munslow (2001) illustrated the epistemological turn in writing history and its role in shaping the meaning of history. He noted that initially, despite the methodological changes and turns of interests in the past, the epistemology of history remained the same through the maintenance of empiricism and rationalism. However, since the 1960s, history underwent epistemological changes due to social science researchers and even scientists who questioned the ability of empiricism and inference to determine the "true meaning of the past" (Munslow, 2001). The result of these questions is the postmodern challenge and the rise of the narrative-linguistic turn (Munslow, 2001). According to Munslow, history is no longer a simple retelling of the past through empiricism and rational analysis because it now includes a postmodern approach which stresses the need for and the reality of history as a form of literary construction. Historians bother with things like normative sources that describe ideals and expectations, instead of upfront descriptions of what happened where, when, and why, because they agree that history is a literary activity. Literary constructions contribute to the understanding of medieval Islamic history by filling out gaps in evidence and offering engaging multiple alternative narratives.

Munslow (2001) asserted that history is not a direct retelling of the past through empiricism and rational analysis as it currently embraces a postmodern approach which underlines the need for and the reality of history as a literary endeavor. Alongside other 1960s researchers and scientists, Munslow (2001) questioned the empirical and rationalist approach to history. He argued that unlike empiricism and rationalism which propose a limited view of history and the role of historians, postmodern history recognizes the demand for fictive historical accounts which question how reality is known and what moral beings should do about this process of knowing. Munslow (2011) emphasized that history is fundamentally about authorship- how historians know what they know and share it with others. As a result, this epistemological turn enables the production of multiple perspectives and stories, enriching how modern readers can understand and appreciate the past. Thus, Munslow is saying that what history is strongly depends on how historians tell them, not just the facts, but how they make and share these stories with their audiences.

Historians bother with things like normative sources that describe ideals and expectations, rather than direct descriptions of the past because they accept history as a literary activity. Munslow (2001) asserted that in reality, history is not a simple description of facts but normative as historians make selective decisions according to fictive authorship. An example is the difference between Gettleman and Schaar’s (2003) excerpts of the Quran on Society and Law and what they say about political legitimacy. The Quran states, "Woe to those who act fraudulently, who exact their full measure when in receipt from others yet give short measure when they reckon out of weigh out for others" (Sura 83, p. 16). The passage directly says what the Quran tells about this topic which exhibits an empiricist historian tradition. On the contrary, historians still value normative sources that include ideals and expectations which is why Gettleman and Schaar (2003) described how three main positions on political successions in the community of believers arose. They determined the ideals and expectations of these camps, the Sunnis, the Shiites, and the Kharajites, which narrate their positions on political succession for the Imam. They narrated the past using their authorship angle. Similarly, Donner (2010) explored the possible reasons on how the Believers changed their support for Abu Bakr, including the practical factors of less booty in subsequently conquered lands and disposition over the latter's ownership (pp. 148-149). By narrating these possible causes, Donner provides his authorship of the past which gives additional meaning to history than its outright facts about the people who ruled after Muhammad’s death. As a literary activity, historians are interested in normative and narrative sources that expand the meaning of the past by adapting a narrative-linguistic turn.

Literary constructions contribute to a more meaningful and interesting modern view of medieval Islamic history by filling out gaps in evidence and exploring plus including multiple alternative narratives. Donner (2010) pointed out the lack of narrative sources and archeological evidence on some aspects of medieval Islamic history, especially Muhammad’s life. Furthermore, historians do not always have access to diverse evidence or sources that can be used to make sense of medieval Islamic history. An example is Yalman (2001) who described the ups and downs of Abbasid art, “Though surviving Abbasids fled to Mamluk Egypt, these caliphs would only have nominal influence.” There is evidence of the decline of the Abbasids but it is not entirely clear why and how their influence fell, at least from this article. Given these gaps, historians can use the postmodern approach to provide different stories on what may have happened in the past. Their narratives may be considered as fictive but they can have strands of truth as they think about and retell the past using their own sense-making methods. The outcome is literary construction that makes the past not necessarily accurate but more engaging and meaningful to modern readers through the existence of numerous alternative stories.

Munslow deviates from the empiricist and rationalist approach to history writing and accepts the postmodern challenge, which historians also find important because they agree with the literary construction of history that produces engaging multiple narratives. Instead of continuing the empiricist tradition, Munslow argues for the role of postmodern history writing in determining new meanings from the past. In support of Munslow, more historians value normative sources and narrative methods because they increasingly accept the literary method as a legitimate way of writing history. Historians value this epistemological turn that enables the rise of multiple voices and alternative fictive authorships which make history continuously engaging and meaningful to modern readers.

## References

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