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# Storytellers as Architects of Memory: A Comparative Analysis of Rafiki and Valmiki

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## Abstract

The paper explores the inherent subjectivity of storytelling through a comparative lens, focusing on Barry Jenkins's *Mufasa: The Lion King* (2024) and Valmiki's *Ramayana*. At the heart of both narratives lies an orator—Rafiki and Valmiki, respectively—who, through their proximity to the protagonist and their narrative authority, shape the moral frameworks of the stories they tell. The study interrogates how narrative bias, memory, time, and the identity of the narrator affect the construction of historical truth and characterisation. Through Rafiki's recounting of Mufasa's life to his grand-cub, and Valmiki's construction of Rama's journey, the paper reveals how orality and personal perspective alter the retelling of events, sometimes romanticising, sometimes villainising, depending on context and audience.

## Key words

- Narrative Subjectivity
- Orality
- Narrative bias
- Comparative retelling
- Myth and Memory

## The Role of the Orator in Shaping Memory

Storytellers have always been the gatekeepers of history. How they narrate a story breaks or makes how an entire culture and society remembers, making the role an important one. The way you narrate this memory can decide the fate of the characters in the story and how they will be remembered. It is important to note that the story does not belong to the storyteller. It might not be the reality, but just a different perspective on reality. Storytelling is an act of knowledge dissemination. Through words, the storytellers transfer their perception of the event to the listeners, thus forming a discourse shaped by their beliefs. This becomes especially critical when the person narrating the story is talking about characters the listeners no longer have access to. The sole information they rely on becomes the one narrated by the storyteller. Thus, storytellers become perception builders and creators of history. The role of the orator demands high responsibility. The orator's subjectivity, the timeline after which said event is being narrated, the relationship of the orator with the character in the story, and the underlying motives behind why the story is being

narrated in the first place all become significant tools moulding how the story itself will be narrated. No matter how hard the storyteller tries, there will be inherent biases that seep into his tale. Thus making it no longer an objective retelling of reality but rather a subjective one, one filled with emotions that the storyteller feels towards the characters in the story.

Subjectivity becomes a flaw when it comes to narrating tales of history. Even today, the world continues to fight about what came first—the ‘mandir’ or the ‘masjid’, each fact, altering reality, altering history, based on who narrates the tale, or more importantly, the identity of who narrates the tale. Depending on who narrates the story, history is visualised and accepted to be a reality.

Oral histories and storytelling are the reasons why today we have stories to look back on. It becomes equally important to pause and critically assess if those stories are reliable, to assess if the storyteller had differed, would the story also differ? The listeners also become core elements of the story, as the storyteller analyses how his story would be received and likely alters it so that it is received well. Thus, in an attempt to make the story engaging, the story is altered. One of the major elements of storytelling becomes the timeline. The timeline after which a story is recounted determines the way it is recounted. However, paradoxically, we place a lot of value on those who have lived long enough to gain wisdom and thus earn the reputation of being reliable storytellers.

## Wisdom as a Determinant of Narrative Reliability

This belief—that time and longevity confer authority also shapes which people, bodies or organisations are trusted as keepers of the past. In ancient India, education was residential. Students lived with their teachers (gurus) and learned through a holistic approach that combined academics, spiritual values, and life skills. This was the Gurukul system of education. It was a schooling system whose origin dates to around 5000 BC in the Indian subcontinent. This system creates a power dynamic where the ‘individual’ guru or sage occupies a literal position of superiority, sitting on one side of the space and addressing the ‘multiple’ students facing him. The information coming from the guru is almost taken at face value, not questioned, not critiqued, just imbibed. Hence, the idea of a “wise sage” imparting knowledge dates way back to 5000 BC, with any form of information coming from this figure, revered because it is assumed to be correct and objectively true. Even in Western Philosophy, mostly the philosophers deemed to possess wisdom are old people, take for instance Aristotle, Plato, Socrates and so on. However, as Oscar Wilde said, “With age comes wisdom, but sometimes age comes alone.”

The Oxford dictionary defines wisdom as “the ability to make sensible decisions and give good advice based on experience and knowledge. It also refers to the knowledge that a society or culture has accumulated over time.” It is a presupposition that wisdom is knowledge gained over experience and time. The storyteller is thus considered to be a good one when it is an older person who has gained enough wisdom as a result of experience and time. Even in contemporary times, there exist books for children titled *Grandma Tales* and *Grandpa Tales*. Grandparents are by default perceived as figures who are all-knowing, given how much “life” they have seen; thus, when we talk about stories, their reality becomes our fiction. The stories told by grandparents to their grandchildren have a strong sense of morality associated with them, a strong sense of the victory of good over evil, but this idea of good versus bad are also archetypes created by the storytellers. Person A, who exhibits traits of selflessness, kindness and honesty, for instance, is good; thus, the behavioural traits associated with the character must also be good. However, Person B exhibits traits which are envy, selfishness and anger, perceived to be bad behavioural traits, thus Person B is bad. This idea of good and bad inherently stems from these stories. Storytelling thus becomes a tool of power, shaping the moral frameworks of young minds and making it important for stories to reflect reality as accurately as possible. However, this connection between narrative and reality is often disrupted by the subjectivity of the storyteller.

The paper explores the inherent subjectivity of storytelling through a comparative lens, focusing on Barry Jenkins’ *Mufasa: The Lion King* (2024) and Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. At the heart of both narratives lies an orator—Rafiki in the former and Valmiki in the latter—who, through their proximity to the protagonist and their narrative authority, shape the moral frameworks of the stories they tell. In this paper, we examine how storytellers are synonymous with wise and revered knowledge disseminators in the media, ideally targeted towards children, thus shaping their minds at a young age. The two figures examined in this paper operate within the domains of film and mythology, respectively. We explore how Rafiki from *The Lion King* and Valmiki, the author of *The Ramayana*, disseminate knowledge, ultimately presenting stories that are widely accepted as reality—or at least as the way reality is remembered. Sometimes, when you are a character in the very story you narrate, your present realities can determine how the story is narrated, even if it is not an accurate recounting of the past.

## The Role of Rafiki in Shaping Mufasa’s Narrative

For a storyteller, “the flaw of time” refers to how memories and thus stories change every time they are recounted. The act of remembering and recalling a story usually involves the narrator recalling the last time the story was told and not the original event. This can lead to distortions, additions or omissions, essentially creating a new.

slightly different version of the story each time. The more a story is narrated, the more it alters the memory of the original event. Thus, giving rise to multiple versions of the original story, even if it is being narrated by the same narrator. Memories are not perfect recordings of events. They are reconstructions that can be influenced by various factors, including our current emotions, beliefs, and even the act of remembering itself.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Rafiki, his reliance on memory to narrate the story is a flaw. He might be recalling and reconstructing the story of Mufasa solely on the memory of the last time he narrated the story, and given the precision with which he “remembered” it, he must have narrated the story quite a few times.

*Mufasa*, as a film, unfolds in the form of a story being narrated by Rafiki. The “main characterisation” of Mufasa and the “villainization” of Taka as Scar was a by-product of the fact that the tale was narrated by Rafiki. Rafiki shares a brother-like bond with Mufasa, which means he has a positive perception and bias towards him. Subjectivity is a flaw and might alter the way events are recounted. Even if we ignore this, the fact remains that the story is being narrated to the grandcub of Mufasa, Kiara, she is the primary listener, which again alters the way a story is narrated. The granddaughter of the ‘protagonist’ would want to hear a story where her ‘grandfather’ is the ‘hero’ of the story. The relationship between Rafiki and Kiara is a reflection of the human world; most children experience their first stories through their grandparents.

The biases of storytelling are portrayed beautifully in the film itself; although it was done for comedic purposes, it proves the point. When Pumba and Timon are narrating the story of how Scar was defeated, they alter the tale a little. Instead of narrating the tale as the event unfolded, which meant Simba defeating Scar, they narrated it as though they were the ones responsible for defeating Scar. In an interesting conversation between Rafiki, Timon and Pumba, we see Timon and Pumba questioning the reliability of the storyteller, especially when the narrator himself becomes the character of the story he is narrating. When Rafiki (the character) is introduced in the story, one can see Rafiki (the narrator) almost romanticising himself. Then, it defends claims of mistruth; he states, “there exists no story of Mufasa without the story of Rafiki”, which brings us again to the point of subjectivity. The way you talk about a character or perceive a character is directly correlated to the bond you had with the character. This perception becomes important because an individual's perception impacts the way a story gets told. One day, his story becomes history, a history we are almost taught to accept as reality by institutions. The problem arises when we accept one version of reality as the absolute and only truth. There lies a not-so-thin line between the story depicting reality and reality itself.

## Questioning the Singular Ramayana

Rafiki, as an all-encompassing figure, reminds me of another figure existing in the

*Hindutva* paradigm. Rafiki also sounds similar to this iconic figure; he was also a great storyteller, one so great that his tale of fiction is almost one that is a reflection of divinity and truth, referred to as the Adi Kavi, which means "first poet", Valmiki.

Despite being located in different cultural, historical and aesthetic contexts, Rafiki and Valmiki occupy a comparable narrative position, each being the authoritative voice through whom the listeners access the life of a revered figure. Someone so distant that the only way to access them becomes the story in which they exist. In both narratives, the storyteller becomes the architect of memory. Rafiki constructs Mufasa as a heroic character, narrating how they became royal and how Pride Rock became their home. Valmiki's narrative comprises a figure who becomes God, the true moral exemplar, someone who symbolises the victory of good over evil and would symbolise good for eons to come. Mufasa and Ram are heroes because of the way their stories were narrated and because of the narrators who narrated them.

What we treat as epics and as the true reflection of 'reality' in the end remain stories narrated by humans, with biases. On the one hand, *Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation*, a scholarly essay by A.K. Ramanujan explores the many variations of the *Ramayana*, examining how the *Ramayana* has changed over time as it was passed down through different languages, cultures, religions and regions with Ramanujan focusing on five specific versions of the *Ramayana*, including the Valmiki, Kamban, Jain, Thai Ramakien, and South Indian folk versions. Although there exist so many versions of the *Ramayana*, Valmiki's *The Ramayana* is revered only because it is the oldest version known.

On the other hand, the film *Sita Sings the Blues* by Nina Paley makes use of varying artworks and visuals to touch upon the idea that the *Ramayana* has many versions to it; this drives the idea that it is almost impractical to rely on one version of truth as the absolute truth. In this reality, there exist multiple tellings of the *Ramayana*, and they all differ from one another, on the basis of the context in which the story was set, too. This is a result of the fact that perhaps the contextual settings of the narrator seeped into the story itself, thus altering it. Professor Robert Goldman told the Indian Express in 2023 that, unlike epics like *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey* that are generally read as classics, the story of Ram "lives in the mind of every Indian". Its retellings are often rooted in the political and cultural contexts in which they are born, and their plots and narratives vary accordingly.

However, this is something the people attached to an 'objective' version of the story find problematic. They get triggered when a certain version of their truth is questioned, or worse, changed. The comments section under Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* proves this point. Ramanujan's essay *Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation* also triggered controversy, stemming from its

exploration of diverse *Ramayana* narratives, including those where Rama and Sita are depicted as siblings, which clashed with the popular, orthodox Hindu version where they are portrayed as husband and wife. This led to objections from some Hindu groups, who viewed the essay as offensive to their religious beliefs, and subsequently, the essay was removed from Delhi University's history syllabus. When one version of the story is seen as the only version of it, anyone who challenges its authenticity is seen as an antagonist. The narrator's relationship with the characters in reality will and must affect the way in which they write or narrate about these characters in their stories. Thus, what is the true *Ramayana*? Stories create our heroes and stories create the villains, the primary architect or birth-giver of both being the storytellers. We, as readers and listeners, need to disassociate from the fact that there can exist only one singular story, or one singular account of reality.

## Remembering Through Stories

Storytelling has a rich history. When we look at the flaws in it— the subjectivity, time itself, the amount of time after which a story is being narrated, the present relationships affecting the way in which the orator recounts memories and reality, one can question how accurately the story mirrors reality. Thus, as the ones receiving the story, it becomes essential to step away from the narrative, from the tonality in which the narrative was delivered, the intent of the storyteller, and bring in our own subjein critically examining the story. Roland Barthes' proposition in *The Death of the Author*<sup>8</sup> is instructive here. Barthes argues that the author (in this case, narrator) merely functions as a "scriptor", assembling pre-existing cultural materials rather than originating meaning. This meaning must be created by the reader (in this case, the listeners), not by the author. A storyteller narrating a story is an author, constructing a story. Thus, the storyteller's narration, one shaped by memory, relationships and cultural biases, acts as an amalgamation of pre-existing cultural materials. Thus, the story must be separated from the authority of the storyteller and interpreted within the listener's own socio-cultural context.

These are storytellers who preserve memory across generations. We need all-encompassing figures like Rafiki and Valmiki for a story to exist and to tell us of figures who, although distant, are remembered and live through stories. Interestingly, in *The Lion King (1994)*, there exists a score by Hans Zimmer, titled *Remember*. For stories and people to remain, we must remember their lives, of how they lived and of their tales of valour and defeat, of the villains in their lives that made them heroes, and most importantly, of the man who 'lives' to tell their stories.

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