

# Simulacra and Simulation: The Power of Storytellers in the Making of History

**Merrin Antony and M. Samundeeswari**

## **Abstract**

Human beings are addicted to stories. The genesis of history begins with the traditional of telling epic stories. In many cases, true accounts of history were mixed with fantastical elements, such as gods and supernatural abilities. The ability of human beings to live in this triple-layered reality sows the seed for creating history. History as it is told today is a mix of fiction and reality, with most of the fiction being found in how the stories are told and who is telling them. History is an amalgamation of the storytellers, the history makers and the historians, of which the storytellers are the pioneers.

**Keywords:** Hyperreality, Fiction, Semiotics, Mythology, Evolution, Power.

## **Introduction**

Human beings are addicted to stories. The genesis of history begins with the traditional of telling epic stories. In many cases, true accounts of history were mixed with fantastical elements, such as gods and supernatural abilities. The ability of human beings to live in this triple-layered reality sows the seed for creating history. History as it is told today is a mix of fiction and reality, with most of the fiction being found in how the stories are told and who is telling them. History is an amalgamation of the storytellers, the history makers and the historians, of which the storytellers are the pioneers. This article describes the power held by stories throughout history, and how the medium of these stories has changed over time.

## **The Storytellers' Craftsmanship**

The most powerful artisans in the human world are the storytellers, as they have the power to create a world within the world through their imagination. Unhindered by reality, imagination has the liberty to break the rules and walk a path between what exists and what does not exist. The audience follows this journey with equal enthusiasm. The concept of imagination plays a higher role in the making and narration of the story. The process of storytelling is cyclical, as the communication of receiving and giving between the storyteller and the listener takes place simultaneously. Oral

tradition in particular allows for instant feedback from listeners. Stories “resemble the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day.”<sup>1</sup> Since the invention of the printing press, and especially since the industrial revolution, storytelling has undergone a significant change in medium, with novels and other printed literature far outpacing oral tradition in popularity and accessibility. Such oral traditions dates back millennia, to when mythologies were passed on from place to place and from time to time in all cultures invariably.

Mythology is the bedrock of stories, humans and literature. In a broader view, myths are uncut truths buried in nature and in fictional characters. It is purely an outcome of imagination and experience. As time passed by, myths overpowered the fact that it is a creative combination of fantasy and observation. They started conquering and taking over the human world. ‘Reason’ is the thin line that distinguished myths from reality. With the help of reasoning, humans converted myth into a reality with the power to create something out of nothing, the power to rule, the power to enslave, the power to fight, the power to kill, the power to fly or travel anywhere on Earth and beyond, the power to talk to humans from any place, the power to multiply stories through different media, and many other infinite powers.

Several fairy tales have their stories rooted in mythology. They replicate the structure of the plot and transform some of the characters to suit the tradition and culture of the modern era. Though the pattern of each mythology appears to be different and chaotic, there is a transparent overlap in almost all of them. These underlying patterns become clear when narratives are placed beside one another. One such best example is the creation myth that exists in almost all religious traditions; each describes the creation of the world through a different means. The origin of creating something ‘out of nothing’ or from ‘chaos’ or ‘darkness’ in many cases.

Across ages, while some enjoyed the luxury of listening to stories, some transformed the stories into reality. It turned out to be a great source for literature when storywriters emerged. Stories were retained through ink and paper forever, like any other art.

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Merrin Antony is a Research Scholar at PSG College of Arts & Science. M. Samundeeswari is an Associate Professor at PSG College of Arts & Science.

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 366.

### **Human Race and Stories**

In *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Humans*, Jonathan Gottschall explains, “We are, as a species, addicted to story. Even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories.”<sup>2</sup> Long ago, humanity lived in the same space and occupied the same positions as animals and other organisms did. We coexisted with each other in harmony and enjoyed all the resources equally. What made human beings different to other organisms is the ability of mankind to understand and live in fiction. Since the beginning, humankind has passed down stories across time and place. Storytelling was one of the most important forms of literature and the most powerful and traditional way of making human beings understand the world. Great leaders who existed in the world adopted ‘stories’ as a tool to make people understand the meaning and purpose of life in the world. As Philip Sidney quoted about the power of poetry which is, to teach and delight, so is the power of story. Stories are so powerful that they distinguish us from other species. Human beings need stories to survive – the story of sin and punishment, the story of heaven and hell, the story of self-consciousness, the story of the eternal soul and so on. We can encode and decode several works of fictions at a time and imagine how it is to live within those stories. The stories of soul, consciousness, heaven and hell are sold even now in the twenty-first century. Though half of the humanity is aware that they live in fictional reality, none can escape the story because fictional reality has become the new truth in our world. It is now hard for humanity to get back to the barter system or to the lifestyle of cave men. Stories have become one of the major realities we live in.

### **Stories and Histories:**

History has always been written majorly in a grandiose epic fashion – an adventurous story with twists and turns. Many of the stories were silenced and filtered so that the events suited the model of a grand spectacle, as well as aiding those who survived long enough to recount historical events and, more often than not, paint themselves as the heroes. In the human world, across ages, the stories were retold, the songs were resung, the chairs were refilled, the rituals were renewed, the books were revamped, the theories were redefined, the criticisms were revised, and the myths were reconstructed. There was nothing too empty and nothing too old. Things kept

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), p. 14.

happening to fill the void, and those things kept changing over time, thus forming a recurrent pattern. There is an underlying pattern or order in the chaos which the human eyes may or may not see. When looked at from the top of a hill, the world down in the plains will always appear to work differently, independently and chaotically but the truth is far beyond from what we see.

The fact that World War I exploded due to the wrong turn of a car, that the discovery of penicillin was an aftermath of a lazy researcher who failed to clean the lab equipment before he went on a holiday, that the spread of Christianity worldwide was due to a passing meteor during a war, are some of the examples for greater effects that began with smallest causes — these major events of the timeline started with something unbelievably ludicrous and insanely accidental. Something small that is not otherwise worth mentioning in the book of history has evolved into a long unforgettable history. In history, the perpetual number of births, deaths, wars, famines, plagues, cultures, religions, politics, economies, art, literary movements, education, myths and the infinite chapters have magnificent patterns that are difficult to decode as the system is complex and massive. To the human eyes, these chapters seem disorderly and irrational but the truth is never at a stone's throw. It all works to form a pattern, a network and a system. An anonymous poem offers a cynical view of this pattern:

For want of a nail the shoe was lost.  
For want of a shoe the horse was lost.  
For want of a horse the rider was lost.  
For want of a rider the message was lost.  
For want of a message the battle was lost.  
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost  
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.<sup>3</sup>

Over time, the hidden pattern is unfurled, and the interacting sources of systems can be traced or cannot be traced as the network might have complex connections someplace else. There can be millions of invisible and interconnected stories behind one event. If a crime happens in a country, the guilt cannot be confined to the criminal alone, as their behaviour can be an effect of the mental traumas they have undergone as a child or youth. Other potential causes are societal pressure, lack of educational opportunities, and

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack* (Boston: The U.S.C. Publishing Co., 1914), p. 22.

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social isolation. In case of the greatest revolutionary movements across history, each is an extension or expansion or rebellion against the previous one. Though the pattern of the happenings seems sudden or unusual, every event is interconnected, and nothing should be viewed as isolated. Like the evolution in the above rhyme, history is an interconnection of several stories that happened at different places across different time.

The infinite webs of stories created by humanity later transformed and evolved to become history. Through stories, culture, art, war, religion, education, science, technology, and money were introduced across the world. Those became myths over time and now myths rule our world. For instance, a human is designated 'poor' if they lack money, 'agnostic' if they do not ascribe to a belief system, and 'unpatriotic' if they are not willing to die for their country. All of these words define human beings in opposition to concepts that only exist in the human idea of the world. None of the concepts they supposedly lack have any material evidence for their natural origin. Once a child is born in this world, then it falls under either of those terms. In human terms of describing the world, the world is 'binary'; nothing is true or real if its opposite is absent. Over time, concepts such as West, Presence, Hero, Nature, and Man came to be considered 'default', while their opposites — East, Absence, Villain, Culture, Woman — are viewed with suspicion. Some of these distinctions have roots in linguistics, though others are down entirely to culture. This powerful story of the hierarchy was passed down to us so deeply and explicitly in the form of stories. Literature, which is history, in other words, reflects these fictitious binary differences of the superiority of one group over the other. The open secret of the discriminations within the binaries is reflected in almost every literary work. As time passed by, stories have become the major tool for spreading the myths of hatred and deceit which in turn has formed history.

If we observe the genesis behind remarkable concepts in history, all of these are clusters of creative stories invented by mankind to gain power over a group of people. All of these ideas stem from certain groups seeking power over others. We still believe that we are the most superior of all other creatures in the world and that we have the right to control the Universe. If something goes wrong, we tend to ascribe significance to it, believing it to be a sign or otherwise the result of some intervening force. Though this can be optimistic, it often results in blame being arbitrarily placed, and often entire social groups are villainised.

Even with millennia of advancements, humans still rely on stories to

navigate the world. We still believe in the fictional boundaries, we still believe that it is bravery to die for safeguarding the fictional boundaries, we still believe that we can enter the Kingdom of God if we obey the authorities, and we still believe in the endless subplots that revolve around these stories. The danger lies in the plot because it need not strictly adhere to logic and reason. Imagination plays a key role in creating the plot of the story. “Humans agree to give up meaning in exchange of power.”<sup>4</sup> To enjoy the power, the history makers edited the mainframe of their story to suit their selfish goals. Stories, like various mythologies, were chosen to be a representation of each one’s symbol and identity. As the human race spread across the world gradually, they formed groups to survive, and each group carried stories which has similar and contrasting characteristics. Slowly, the humans defended their stories to mark their identity. History thus began as a story of power, and we now live and prey on these stories by claiming the right to live in these artificial realities.

### **Hyper Reality in Religious History**

Currently, Christianity is the leading religion of the majority in the world. The crux of all the believers of Christianity is the Bible. Divinity has often been confused with obeying or surrendering to some higher power; the believers are hypnotised with policies of complete surrender to state authority because of the divine interference and they believe that opposition of any sort would be an act of sin. “Everyone must obey the state authorities, because no authority exists without God’s permission, and the existing authorities have been put there by God. Whoever opposes the existing authority opposes what God has ordered; and anyone who does so will bring judgement on himself.”<sup>5</sup> God is likely to punish anyone who stands up for their rights against the authorities. Authorities are appointed by God himself which clearly implies that whatever the government say or do is for the good of the people.

This view of religion is simplistic and uncharitable. That being said, this hyperreal story has always had an impact with the authorities. They enjoy the supreme status as God and the citizens have always been subservient to their laws and conditions. To quote an example of taxation, “That is also why

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<sup>4</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York: Vintage, 2017), p. 233.

<sup>5</sup> *Good News Bible: With Deuterocanonical Books* (London: United Bible Societies, 1980), p. 177.

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you pay taxes, because the authorities are working for God when they fulfill their duties.”<sup>6</sup> All the laws that the authorities impose are seen as divine and should not be violated. This story of power, which would have been written in favour of the then government or by some authorities who demanded respect, is still followed. While not all systems impose God as the authority, governments often operate with the idea that they have divine authority over the masses.

Many of the stories in the Bible have principles that remain relevant to this day. Among the participants and the rulers, three categories of humans are involved in the religious history. First is the category of rulers, who oversaw which stories were allowed to be told and which were told most often. Second is the category of the audience, who enjoy stories for how they are made to feel by them. Third is the category of participants whose naivety defines them. They often have trouble distinguishing between story and reality. These are the real victims of stories because the other two categories enjoy the privilege of weaving the story or being a part of the story. As Yuval Noah Harari states, “It’s ironic that they swear to tell the truth on a book brimming with so many fictions, myths and errors. Corrupting the minds of human beings with stories of the fictitious power and exploiting them is not the same as simple storytelling; as storytelling is generally done with the purpose of eliciting emotion, while corruption has the goal of making the audience obey a command. To distinguish between reality and fiction has become increasingly difficult over time, as even true stories are now told with some degree of embellishment. The construct of the fictional reality lies in blending the story and the objective reality. As Jean Baudrillard states, “The simulacrum is never what hides the truth - it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true.”<sup>7</sup>

The question that arises now is that who profits and who suffers from these hyperrealities. Those in power absolutely profits because theirs is the government, the laws and the whole human world. The sufferers in this hyperreality are those who are victimised in the resulting narratives, such as the casualties of war, slaves, abused women, victims of disasters, and members of oppressed groups such as queer people. The list is endless, and the hyperreal worlds are multiplying. The territories, the religion, the economy, the politics, the media, the laws are the hyperreal worlds, whereas

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<sup>6</sup> *Good News Bible*, p. 177.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 1.

only the suffering of the humanity exists in reality. Those in power can make and break the rules according to their selfish needs. History continues flowing and we are a part of this grand making. These structures are so deeply rooted in the minds of human beings that nobody takes time to realize the fact that these irrational structures in stories, which we now witness in reality, were created by some human beings to enjoy the resources while exploiting/taxing a few. There are patterns in stories which, if reconstructed, can make a new peaceful world.

### **Conclusion**

Stories are creative and powerful yet dangerous. History is a collection of such common network of stories. Stories have the power to create something new, to recreate things, and to retain ideas across time. Powerful stories evolved along with humans. History books do not chronicle everything that happened, but rather choose to narrate some stories while silencing the others. History is formed in such a way that only those in power enter the books of history in majority while the story of the rest is only statistics, like the lady or the sculptor or the archer.

Fiction has the strange luxury of masking the real world. Through this, truth may be lost. Indeed, fiction is often utilised by authorities in order to influence the masses into obedience. As long as as humanity exists, so will stories. In the twenty-first century, new stories might not revolve more around religions or myths, but the power of data. Our reliance on data will form groups and stories and later history. We are in a transition phase, and we are slowly moving towards the reliance on data rather than on humans. The world that we believe is real is not the faithful image of the reality but only a hyperreal version. Indeed, humans seem to enjoy this hyperreal story than the physical reality. We experience the same feeling or happiness as the objective reality itself. We are aware that the media world is not a faithful copy, but we seem to celebrate it as though it is real life. The internet that we access every day is the product of stories too. More than ever, help us connect with each other across the globe. It has become the new reality of Homo sapiens. Hyperreality will continue to thrive.

Our future will have different sets of stories, which means a different history. Now, wars rely on technology and resources more so than just manpower. More people die of disease than through violence. Artificial Intelligence will take over the whole human world and we will live in a completely different world than now. As Harari says, "History does not

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tolerate a vacuum.”<sup>8</sup> Something ends, a new story is bound to emerge.

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<sup>8</sup> Harari, *Homo Deus*, p. 22.