Considering Nelson Goodman's concept of Pluriworldism in Sita's Ramayana

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Abstract:

The famous philosopher Nelson Goodman has established the theory of 'pluriworldism' accepting and accommodating various different versions of the reality. Goodman's constuctivist attitude is still relevant in the context of postmodern text like Sita's Ramayana. This graphic novel has attempted to retell and re-show the age-old narrative of Ramayana. The study of this pictographic narrative in the light of 'pluriworldism' can establish the multidimensional figure of Sita as the frame of reference. The multiple questions that are aroused in the text clearly refer to the behind-the-scene facts which are untold so far. Sita's presence and her reality are as true as it is true for any other characters of Ramayana. That's why; changing the frame of reference is significant for a new adaptation of the myth so that it could be relatable for the present generation. Through the process of ordering, deletion, supplementation and reformation, it is possible to create a new narrative that can address the problems like gender, oppression, violence, justice, globalization etc.

Keywords: Goodman, pluriworldism, constructivist, versions of reality, retell and re-show, changing the frame of reference, relatable.

"We make versions, and true versions make worlds."

—Nelson Goodman

Henry Nelson Goodman's philosophical work Ways of World making is mostly dedicated to a defence of 'irrealism'. According to Goodman, it is impossible to catch the world as such because there is no single world but there are several worlds present in the reality. The multiplicity of the 'worlds' is made or constructed through the cognitive and symbolic activities of human beings. Myth becomes the medium of sharing the 'collective unconscious' for any culture. The concepts of 'pluriworldism' and 'worldmaking' are mostly intertwined with each other in Goodman's writings because he has claimed

that we inhabit many worlds of our own making. The natures of any particular place relate themselves with the characters of the myth and their story present in that place. According to Nelson Goodman, "we are not speaking in terms of multiple   possible alternatives to a single actual world but of multiple actual worlds".[i] That's why; his concept of 'irrealism' is different from the anti-realism proposed by Michael Dummett.

Goodman has proposed the i d e a o f 'versions' as he b e l i e v e s in 'making right versions is to make worlds'. Alexander Declos in his article "Goodman's **Many** **Worlds**" has said that   a v e r s i o n is **any** d e s c r i p t i o n, representation or depiction of reality. A version consists of symbols in any medium — words, pictures, sounds, symbols etc.   Whenever w e create a representation of reality, we create a version. Few examples of versions can be Ptolemy's geocentric model and Copernicus's heliocentric model of the cellular system. The paintings of Van Gogh or Canaletto are their created versions. There are enormous ranges of different versions that are possible to create. The scientific theories, Mathematical systems, artistic conventions – all of these can   constitute different versions.   Similarly, Indian myths provide the versions of our Indian reality which provide both the points of convergences and divergences.

The presence of single standardized version of Ramayana cannot deny the presences of all the   other   versions of Ramayana. Like Mahabharata, Ramayana has numerous versions as it has been often told in different provinces of the country. We cannot say that one such narrative 'Konkana Ramayana' is not the true version just because it has opposed in various points with the popularized narrative of Ramayana. So, who is to decide the authentic/   true   version   of myth?   Our   postmodern   scenario   always motivates to de-hierarchize the space created for the 'authentic' version and the 'other' versions with an all-inclusive attitude. Not only the versions contradict with each other, but also they share some of the common aspects of the Indian lives, morals and values.

The description of the way of the world is possible only through a particular frame of reference. To the question of what the world is like independently of versions or frames of references, nothing can be said. There are many true but incompatible versions. Hence, there are many conflicting worlds that have equal claim to the truth. None of the worlds is more real than others, but we can always select one world as our reference world, which we call actual. There are no further, version-independent, "underlying facts". The so-called 'actual' world differs between disciplines, or even inside a discipline, when we change our point of view. Nelson Goodman in his book Ways of Worldmaking has said: "So long as contrasting right versions not all reducible to one are countenanced, unity is to be sought not in an ambivalent or neutral something beneath these versions but in an overall organization embracing them."[ii]

Ramayana has been predominantly thought as the story of Rama but Rama is not the only character in the epic. No narrative is absolutely innocent as it is always told from the perspective of a particular character. If the lens is changed, then the whole story can be altered. The writer Samhita Arni and the painter Moyna Chitrakar who have jointly composed the book Sita's Ramayana have decided to narrate the story from the perspective of Sita. The pain, rejection, love, hatred, shame and the untold agony – everything that Sita experiences in her life has become relatable for any Indian common woman. The graphic novel is a well-established genre   by the twentieth century   which   provides a   pictographic presentation of   the combined visual and verbal narratives. In Sita's Ramayana, graphic novel becomes a medium of both retelling and   re-showing age-old story of Ramayana. The myth remains alive when it can be connected with the present-day social reality. The adaptation of an ancient myth in the graphic novel leads a way to explore   the   contemporary concerns like gender, globalization, nature, and approach to justice and so on.

The forest has been depicted at the beginning of the novel as an active living agent watching Sita, thinking about her, conversing with Sita and calling her 'sister'. 'Sister' is an appropriate word because Sita is the daughter of the earth and the forest is nurtured by the same womb of the earth. Forest is shown to request Sita in the whispering voice to tell her story and from that point onwards Sita has started narrating her story. Sita asks for shelter in that forest because she informs that 'the world of men has banished me.'iii Here raises the question of gender that how far a woman's honour is secured in the world of men. The present text not only contains the narrative of Sita but also shares its narrative space with other women characters such as Trijata, Surpanakha and Tara. All the women characters are neither   glorified nor are they stigmatized or demonized; instead the writer has presented them in a realistic manner.

At the beginning, Sita is presented as a beautifully dressed woman like a queen but still she walks with pain after her abandonment by Rama. Her 'belly huge with child, her ankles swollen, her delicate feet bruised by thorns and brambles'iv – all these physical descriptions are important to describe her condition. Though Sita was the princess of Mithila and later the queen of Ayodhya, she has spent her entire life as an ordinary woman. Sita has been drawn by the potua artist Moyna Chitrakar as a woman of dusky, dark complexion which is commonly found in Dravidian woman. On the contrary, she has red vermillion in her hair along with red bindi which are most commonly found in Bengali tradition or in some of the allied tradition found in Orissa and Bihar. The visual representation shown in the title page clearly indicates that Sita is the mouthpiece of every Indian woman here.

The myth of Ramayana has crossed the boundaries of time, space and religion too because Patua itself is a significant oral folk tradition and indigenous art that produce the scroll with the help of handmade paper, clothe, vegetable and mineral dyes. The most important fact is that this art is given life with its 'katha' or narrative and many

of the narrators and artists are muslim who travel from place to place, singing out the stories showing their scrolls. As the pictorial presentation of the story has followed the potua tradition, every artist has become associated with it along with their culture. The dramatic tension, awkward silence – all these are created beautifully with the help of complete black page. The two black pages left at the beginning of the story set the darker mood of the story. Again the black page is found after the abduction of Sita by Ravana because it is a turning point in both the story as well as in Sita's life. Sita's abduction is depicted by a frame that just has the blue ocean with ripples and waves in black that seem unending. The vastness of the ocean is signified through those small pictures like blue waters with waves. The pictures, the colour combinations and the words – everything   is significant in creating the meaning of the narrative as a whole.

Patua art has its unique style of portraying the characters. Almost all the characters in the book have shown to wear white kundals in their ears and similar necklaces. Surpanakha is depicted in two different hairstyles for her two different portrayals as a pretty woman and demon. The Ravana   is always portrayed as a figure representing aggression, violence and energy but he has also expressed his love for Sita. Ravana has never   been portrayed as completely villainous because whatever he did reflects his love for his dear sister Surpanakha. The idea of replacing Ravana by his younger brother virtuous Bibhishana has first come in the mind of Sita before anyone else while staying in Ashoka kanana. Even Rama is glorified as a capable prince because Sita has high respect for him and she has wanted to glorify him.

Hanuman has been portrayed as a hero in the place of Rama because of his several heroic activities like discovering Sita, killing Mahi-Ravana, burning Lanka down, carrying herbs and so on. Hence, it is difficult to decide who the hero of this narrative is. This tale of Sita is written in such a way that it casually helps in arising several questions at the minds of the readers. Sita's Ramayana has clearly portrayed the futility of the war. It has also highlighted the unfair means used in the war, for instance, the treacherous killing of Indrajit by Laxmana. These incidents force   the readers to rethink the fundamental definition of virtue or vice. The question can be- Who was the first wrong-doer of the wheel of unpleasant events and who is the victim here? The characters like Tara and Mandodori have suffered the consequences of the events without even having any major fault just like Sita. This is also true for all the women and children of Lanka. Thus, a war can never be justified as benevolent.

If Ravana is found   guilty for initiating this war by abducting Sita then Sita has herself found the reason in the previous act of Rama and Laxmana. Sita has shown the act of cutting the nose of Surpanakha by Laxmana as the   act of violence. Sita says while narrating Surpanakha's incidence: "violence breeds violence and an unjust act only begets greater injustice. Rama should have stopped him. Instead he spurred him on."v Sita has highlighted the fact that Rama and Lakshmana have invited this violence as both the princes and   warriors are tired of the peace of the forest. It indicates to

the fact that the great   injustice has happened with Sita as consequence of the prince's act of violence – making Surpanakha scream and the chopping of her nose by Laxmana.

The men are glorified when they fought the war and when they achived victory. But the women generally bear the consequences of the war. They are also often marked as the reason behind the war. The writer and the potua artist of this book jointly attempt to un-glorify the war by showing Sita's pain and suffering, Tara's dilemma, Trijata's love of the motherland even after knowing the future. At the end of the war, the narrative also raises the questions of freedom, love, justice etc. Sita herself says: "I thought the end of the war had meant freedom for me. I had hoped for love, I had hoped for justice. That was not to be. Instead of love, I found suspicion.
Instead of justice, I met with false accusation and distrust."[vi]

The traditional tale of Ramayana has somehow sidelined Sita's pain and sufferings. In Sita's Ramayana, Sita narrates her own tale: "I had suffered so much. Captivity. The constant taunts of my jailers…I had despaired for so long. I had starved, I had waited, I had kept myself alive – only for Rama."[vii]   Sita has her complete trust on Rama but she remains unaware of the fact that her abandonment was pre-planned. The whole forest has empathized with her story and the sage Valmiki is shown as a kind figure giving her shelter. This is for the second time that Sita has accepted her miseries of life. The practical questions that should come in the mind of a pregnant woman have also come in the mind of Sita when she was in her second exile. Her practical thinking provokes the questions like – How will she avoid snakes in the forest as she cannot see under her huge belly? How will she outrun the beasts of the forest? Who will assist her in her labour?

Sita has later accustomed herself with the peaceful life in the forest as the mother of two beautiful sons – Lava and Kusha. Then, Rama has been unknowingly defeated by his own sons and come to know about the truth. Sita refuses to return to Ayodhya with Rama when she has been persuaded by Rama to do so. She becomes adamant and takes stand for her honour. At this point, she says – "I do not wish to be queen. I have been doubted
Once, twice, and I do not care to be doubted again."[viii] At the end of this book, Sita is shown to take shelter at the lap of her mother – the goddess of earth. If Sita is related to every common Indian woman then her end of life disturbs the mind of the audience.

In the entire narrative, Sita is portrayed as a woman fighting for space and this impression is somewhat contradictory with her decision of welcoming death. It creates many questions like- Is it a deliberate self-killing, or is it about a desire to be dead? Or does it have other meanings? Is it a rational choice, an act of love for Rama or the rejection of him and through him of the patriarchal society? How could death be an option to outrun the shame? Is it a message she is giving out, an act of revolt? Can it be seen as an attempt to affect a change in the perspective of the world around her? Does it present an idea of noble death and need to be glorified? How far it is a just act for her children, Lava and Kusha? Is death a vehicle or a medium to portray the society that facilitates in the process interrogating her marriage to Rama, the perfect man? Does her death glorify the crown of

Rama as an ideal king? All these questions are unanswered and the readers are free to interpret in the present context of open-ended narrative. When multiple conflicting questions are present then Nelson Goodman attempts to solve them in the following manner.

There are four possible options in response to the presence of many conflicting true versions. At first, the conflicting versions are true of one and the same world. Secondly, only one of the conflicting versions can be considered as true. Thirdly, the versions do not really conflict; they can be reconciled. Finally, the conflicting versions are true for different worlds. Goodman argues that there are many cases where the first three responses are unacceptable. In this way, Declos has logically established Goodman's idea of 'pluriworldism'. In the particular section "The Many- Worlds Argument" of Declos' article 'Goodman's Many Worlds', the author has produced another statement of logical argument:

Premise 1: There are true conflicting versions. Premise 2: To each true version answers a world.
Conclusion 1: Either true conflicting versions answer to one and the same world, or they answer to different worlds.

Premise 3: True conflicting versions cannot answer to one and the same world.

Conclusion 2: True conflicting versions answer to different worlds.

According to this logical structure, many conflicting versions can be simultaneously true on the basis of their respective reference frames. The famous scientific example considered for the explanation is-

Statement 1: The Earth is at rest. Statement 2: The Earth moves.
These statements are in conflicting position because the same object cannot be at rest and in motion at the same time. According to Physics, the motion is always relative to one's frame of reference. If Exeter is considered as a fixed point, then statement 1 is true and statement 2 is false. If Sun is considered as a fixed point, then the statement 2 is true and statement 1 is false. Therefore, the truth can be changed with the changing reference frames. Nelson Goodman has once said, "Not only motion…but even reality is relative."[ix]

The worlds or multiple world-versions are always human-made. We create the 'worlds' according to our knowing or understanding of the truths of the world. Goodman has suggested plenty of methods with the help of which new worlds can be made from the existing ones. Through the method of composition and decomposition, the existing world can be divided into many sub-worlds so that their features can be analyzed to make new connections, until we can combine the parts in a new way. Through the method of weighting, the difference between worlds is emphasized. The parts which are relevant for one system of understanding (version or world) can be irrelevant in the other. Through the method of ordering, the objects are ordered and grouped together before we

can grasp them. The ways of ordering are built in the world and they depend on the objects and context.

Through the method of deletion and supplementation, the old versions or fragments of world are deleted in favor of the new versions. After deleting those versions, we collect and supplement the fragments and hints which we need. Through the method of reformation, we sometimes reform the world or destroy its original forms. The reformation can be seen either as correction or as corruption.

Myth as a process of world-making is closely related to our knowing or perceiving of the world's versions. The knowing is reconstructing according to the constructivist view of learning   and all processes of constructing worlds also lead to knowing. That's why; Goodman's idea of 'pluriworldism' is a relevant concept for interpreting the old myth in a new manner. When Sita is considered as the frame of reference then the narrative presented in Sita's Ramayana provides the correct version. While looking at the same narrative from the point of view of Rama, Ravana or any other character can alter many of the facts. Hence, the versions are completely dependent on the basis of their frames of references. But we cannot only accept Rama's narrative and deny the narrative of Sita. Ramayana is still alive with its numerous different story-telling techniques, provincial and dialectical variants and also in the various adaptations of the epic. We mostly use the method of the fabrication of facts for the world-making that suits our present condition the most. Sita's Ramayana is one such retelling of the same old epic Ramayana which has been accepted by the postmodern authors and critical thinkers as an important version of the reality which is as true as all other accepted versions of Ramayana.

i Goodman, Nelson. Ways of Worldmaking, New York: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988, pp- 2

ii Goodman, Nelson. Ways of Worldmaking, New York: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988, pp- 5

iii Arni, Samhita, Moyna Chitrakar. Sita's Ramayana. Chennai: Tara Books Pvt. Ltd. 2011, pp-9

iv Arni, Samhita, Moyna Chitrakar. Sita's Ramayana. Chennai: Tara Books Pvt. Ltd. 2011, pp-8

v Arni, Samhita, Moyna Chitrakar. Sita's Ramayana. Chennai: Tara Books Pvt. Ltd. 2011, pp-16

vi Arni, Samhita, Moyna Chitrakar. Sita's Ramayana. Chennai: Tara Books Pvt. Ltd. 2011, pp-121 vii Arni, Samhita, Moyna Chitrakar. Sita's Ramayana. Chennai: Tara Books Pvt. Ltd. 2011, pp-119 viii Arni, Samhita, Moyna Chitrakar. Sita's Ramayana. Chennai: Tara Books Pvt. Ltd. 2011, pp-145

ix Goodman, Nelson. Ways of Worldmaking, New York: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988, pp- 20

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