

Time and Space in Eastern Narratives: Philosophical Foundations, Structural Variations and Contemporary Adaptations

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Abstract

Time and Space serve as fundamental elements in shaping the identity of Eastern and Western narrative traditions; therefore, it is essential to analyse and elucidate their philosophical, structural, and thematic distinctions to enhance a deeper understanding of their narrative frameworks. While Western narratives often adhere to a linear, cause-and-effect chronology, Eastern narratives embrace cyclical time, layered storytelling, and fluid spatiality, influenced by Indian, Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian, and Sufi Philosophies and mythological structures. The study explores how Indian, Japanese, Chinese, and Middle Eastern storytelling integrates mythological, historical and allegorical dimensions, where time is repetitive, recursive, and multi-perspectival, rather than a progressive sequence of events. Similarly, spatial representations in Eastern narratives transcend mere geography, functioning as symbolic, dreamlike, and liminal landscapes that merge the metaphysical with the mundane. The study partly investigates the modern evolution of these narrative traditions, particularly in literature, cinema and digital storytelling, where the synthesis of fantasy and realism continues to shape contemporary narrative structures. Works such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, *The Tale of Genji*, *Journey to the West*, *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, and modern adaptations in other media forms demonstrate the enduring elasticity and adaptability of Eastern storytelling. By drawing on narrative theory, postcolonial studies, and comparative literary analysis, this research underscores the diverse temporal and spatial constructs that define global storytelling traditions. The findings suggest that Eastern narrative traditions offer an alternative epistemology of time and space, challenging Western literary paradigms and influencing contemporary transmedia narratives worldwide.

Keywords: Eastern narrative traditions, time and space, fantasy and realism, comparative literature

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Introduction

Storytelling has played a fundamental role in Eastern narrative traditions which encompass a broad range of storytelling techniques, structures, and themes originating from Asia, the Middle East, and other non-western cultures. These traditions are deeply influenced by cultural, historical, and philosophical elements, preserving it through various narrative forms. The intertwined notions of time and space must have flowed through the narratives over time within such a framework. In recent years, modern adaptations, digital storytelling, and transnational literary influences have reshaped these narratives creating significant changes in these traditions at the advent of globalization, digitalization, and hybrid cultural exchanges. The present study examines both the historical foundations of Eastern narrative traditions and their contemporary transformations in literature, cinema, and digital media, by exploring key developments, from classical epics to contemporary multimedia narratives.

Philosophical Foundations in Eastern Narrative Traditions

Eastern narrative traditions have historically been shaped by religious, philosophical, and oral storytelling influences. Some prominent classical forms include Indian epics and mythological narratives, Japanese narrative forms, Chinese narrative traditions, and Middle Eastern narrative traditions. The common thread that connects all of them is the coexistence of fantasy and realism which is readily manifested, creating a dynamic interplay between the supernatural and the mundane, the mythical and the historical, the allegorical and the literal. Unlike the Western literary tradition, which often draws a clear line between fantasy and realism, Eastern storytelling embraces a fluid, interwoven approach where the boundaries between these two modes are often blurred. This unique synthesis is evident in classical Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Middle Eastern narratives, where fantastical elements seamlessly coexist with realistic settings, reflecting both cultural worldviews and philosophical underpinnings. Eastern narrative traditions view reality as multifaceted and permeable, where the supernatural is not separate from everyday life but an intrinsic part of existence. Whether in mythological epics, folktales, historical chronicles, or modern literature and cinema, the fusion of fantasy and realism in Eastern narratives serves as a mechanism for historical reflection, cultural transmission, social critique, and spiritual exploration. This elastic relationship between the real and the fantastic allows for a deeply symbolic storytelling tradition that simultaneously preserves the past, critiques the present, and envisions alternative futures.

The philosophical foundations of Eastern storytelling contribute significantly to the fusion of fantasy and realism. In Chinese Daoist thought, reality is perceived as inherently fluid and ever-changing, allowing for narratives where dreams, illusions, and mystical journeys function as legitimate extensions of the real world. This is evident in *Zhuangzi*, where the famous story of a man dreaming, he is a butterfly—and subsequently questioning whether he is a man dreaming of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of being a man—highlights the blurred nature of reality and fantasy. Similarly, Buddhist cosmology influences Indian and Japanese storytelling, where the concept of multiple realms, reincarnation, and spiritual transcendence allows narratives to move effortlessly between the physical and metaphysical. The *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, for example, blend historical realism with divine interventions, moral allegory, and celestial warfare, treating fantasy as an extension of spiritual and moral truth rather than an escape from reality. In Middle Eastern literature, Islamic storytelling traditions, particularly Sufi mysticism, incorporate dream sequences, supernatural encounters, and divine revelations into otherwise realistic settings. The *One*

Thousand and One Arabian Nights is a quintessential example, where nested storytelling structures create a labyrinthine mix of fantasy and realism, mirroring the complexities of human experience. These traditions establish a literary framework in which fantasy is not an anomaly but an essential narrative tool that enhances, rather than diminishes, the realism of human emotions, struggles, and aspirations.

One of the defining characteristics of fantasy in Eastern narratives is its organic integration with historical and everyday realities. In contrast to Western high fantasy, which often constructs separate worlds with their own rules, Eastern fantasy typically emerges within a recognizable cultural and historical landscape. In classical Chinese literature, *Journey to the West* exemplifies this fusion, combining historical travelogue, Buddhist mythology, Confucian morality, and Daoist supernaturalism into an epic adventure that is at once fantastical and deeply grounded in historical reality. The protagonist, Xuanzang, was a real historical figure, but his journey is mythologized through the introduction of fantastical characters such as the Monkey King, Sun Wukong, whose supernatural abilities and mischievous antics serve as allegorical reflections on human folly and spiritual enlightenment. Similarly, in Japanese literature, works like *The Tale of Genji* incorporate ghostly apparitions, supernatural karma, and dreamscapes within a highly detailed and historically accurate Heian court society. This interplay of fantasy and realism allows for a psychological depth and philosophical inquiry that transcends mere entertainment, offering insight into human nature and the moral cosmos.

Symbolic and allegorical function is another key feature of Eastern fantasy-realism. Unlike the purely escapist nature of some Western fantasy traditions, Eastern fantastical elements often serve as metaphors for deeper truths about existence, morality, and society. In Indian and Persian storytelling traditions, supernatural beings such as rakshasas (demons), djinns, and celestial beings are not merely magical creatures but manifestations of human desires, fears, and ethical dilemmas. The Sufi-influenced Persian epic *The Conference of the Birds* by Farid-ud-din Attar of Nishapur uses animal allegory and mythical landscapes to explore the mystical journey of the soul toward divine truth. Similarly, Japanese Noh theatre and ghost stories (kaidan) use supernatural encounters as metaphors for guilt, karma, and unresolved human emotions, where ghosts serve as reminders of past sins rather than mere horror elements. This symbolic approach is also present in Chinese classical poetry and landscape painting, where mythological creatures, enchanted forests, and dreamlike palaces are not meant to depict literal fantasy worlds but rather to evoke philosophical meditations on nature, time and impermanence.

The intersection of fantasy and realism in Eastern storytelling has also found expression in modern literature and cinema, where traditional narrative structures continue to evolve in contemporary forms. In Chinese modern fiction, authors like Mo Yan and Liu Cixin weave magical realism and speculative fiction into historical and political contexts, critiquing the forces of modernity while drawing upon ancient literary techniques. Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*, for example, incorporates hallucinatory descriptions, mythical exaggeration, and dreamlike sequences to depict China's turbulent 20th-century history, while Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* fuses scientific realism with cosmic horror and mythic storytelling, creating a unique hybrid of Eastern metaphysics and hard science fiction. In Japanese cinema, filmmakers like Hayao Miyazaki have masterfully blended mythology, environmental realism, and fantasy aesthetics, as seen in *Spirited Away*, where the protagonist's journey into a magical realm is deeply interwoven with themes of industrialization, environmental destruction, and cultural memory. Similarly, Korean dramas and films such as *The Host* and

Parasite incorporate elements of supernatural horror and social realism, reflecting the tension between modern anxieties and traditional values.

This elasticity of fantasy and realism is further amplified in digital and interactive storytelling, where Eastern narratives continue to evolve through video games, anime, and online fiction. Japanese visual novels and role-playing games (RPGs) often blur the boundaries between historical accuracy and mythic storytelling, as seen in *Final Fantasy*, where real-world history and mythology are reimagined through intricate world-building and parallel timeframes. Similarly, Chinese web novels have developed a new genre of Xianxia (immortal hero fantasy), where traditional Daoist and Buddhist cosmology is integrated into fast-paced digital storytelling. These new mediums demonstrate how the fantasy-realism synthesis in Eastern narratives remains culturally resonant and artistically innovative, capable of adapting to changing modes of storytelling while preserving its fundamental philosophical and narrative principles.

Ultimately, the coexistence of fantasy and realism in Eastern narrative traditions reflects a holistic view of reality, one in which the material and spiritual worlds are not in opposition but mutually interwoven. This narrative elasticity allows for stories that are simultaneously mythical and historical, allegorical and literal, supernatural and deeply human. Unlike the rigid genre distinctions often imposed in Western literature, Eastern storytelling embraces a continuum of reality and imagination, where ghosts, gods, and celestial beings are as much a part of the world as emperors, warriors, and peasants. This philosophical and aesthetic approach to narrative continues to shape the storytelling traditions of China, Japan, India, and the Middle East, ensuring that fantasy and realism remain inseparable dimensions of artistic and cultural expression. As Eastern narratives continue to evolve in the globalized world, their unique synthesis of myth, history, and imagination will undoubtedly continue to captivate, inspire, and redefine the possibilities of storytelling in the twenty-first century and beyond.

The elasticity and highly flexible nature of Eastern narrative traditions allows them to evolve across time, adapt to diverse cultural and historical contexts, and fluidly integrating multiple perspectives within a single story. “With this narrative flexibility is probably connected the fluidity of the time within the narrative frame. Narrative time in Indian texts is more psychological in character than logical; and this is one the major differences between nineteenth century western fiction and traditional Indian narrative” (Paniker, p. 14). Unlike the rigid three-act structure that often defines Western storytelling, Eastern narratives embrace cyclical time, layered storytelling, interwoven subplots, and fluid narrative forms that defy conventional temporal and spatial constraints. While examining Indian critical discourse and textual tradition, Vatsyayan aptly observed the innate flexibility in the Indian arts. “Indeed, in the Indian tradition, certain types of oral texts are fixed, frozen and unchanging and the written texts are fluid and changing. The *Natyasastra* is an excellent example of this phenomenon. Flexibility is inbuilt in the very structure of a text” (Vatsyayan, p. 39). This flexibility is evident across various literary and artistic traditions, from ancient epics and folklore to contemporary digital storytelling. Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Middle Eastern narrative traditions particularly exemplify this adaptability, as they have continuously absorbed philosophical, spiritual, and historical influences while remaining deeply rooted in their respective cultural heritages. The non-linearity, meta-narrative qualities, and multi-perspective approach embedded in Eastern storytelling make it uniquely capable of preserving ancient traditions while simultaneously reinventing itself in response to modern artistic and technological shifts. This elasticity is not merely a stylistic or structural

phenomenon; rather, it reflects a fundamental worldview—one that perceives life as a continuum of interconnected events rather than a sequence of isolated moments with fixed beginnings and endings.

Interwoven Temporalities and Cyclical Narratives

The elasticity of time in Eastern narratives plays a crucial role in their adaptability. Unlike Western literary traditions, which generally follow a linear progression of past-present-future, Eastern stories often function within cyclical, layered, and recursive timeframes. This approach to time is deeply influenced by Buddhist, Hindu, and Daoist philosophies, which emphasize the continuity of existence, reincarnation, and the impermanence of life. For instance, Indian epics such as *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* do not merely recount singular events; rather, they encompass vast temporal arcs where characters experience multiple lifetimes, divine interventions, and karmic repercussions that ripple across centuries. Indian Puranas also represent the boundlessness of its timeframes. As Ayappa Paniker rightly points out, “There is sometimes, as in the Indian Puranas, a deliberate attempt on the part of the narrator to leave the supposed time of the supposed happenings in an undefined area of time, thereby shifting the emphasis from a definite dateline to indefinite infinity.” The spatial actions within the Puranas reflect the all-encompassing nature of a story. “The narrative space too is encyclopaedic in the purana, in keeping with the ever-widening range of the action presented” (Paniker, p. 38). Similarly, the *Jataka Tales*, which narrate the past lives of the Buddha, function within an expansive concept of time in which the past, present, and future seamlessly intertwine. This cyclical understanding of time allows narratives to expand infinitely, incorporating new layers, subplots, and interpretations without ever becoming outdated. “In the Indian narrative, time is measured in cosmic terms: day and night, the different phases of moon, the cycle of seasons, the ages or aeons measured out by the stars, as it were” (Paniker, p. 15). Even the critical concepts in Bharata’s *Natyaśāstra* inherently facilitate a multifaceted interpretation of the text, allowing readers to engage with its content in diverse and nuanced ways. “The text itself, then, in its very structure, makes room for fluidity of interpretation and allows for multiple ways of understanding it” (Vatsyayan, p. 38).

Japanese literary traditions, particularly those influenced by Zen Buddhism, also showcase a remarkable elasticity in temporal representation. “...in terms of traditional Japanese thinking, a change in place (and character) brings in a temporal dimension. Thus, it is conventional for Japanese history to be divided into time periods that are associated with places” (Heita, 2004, pp. 36-39). The concept of *mujō* (impermanence) is a recurrent theme in Japanese literature and aesthetics, reflecting a worldview that embraces constant change and transformation. Works such as *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu and Noh theatre performances employ dreamlike transitions between past and present, as well as symbolic representations of fleeting moments that convey deep emotional and existential truths. “The concomitants of the concept of empty space are the deep reflection, intense gaze, symbolism, minimalism and circularity of time. These virtues lead to the realization of *yugen*, the supreme aesthetic feeling that a Noh actor realises while performing” (Damodaran A., 2020, p. 12). In Chinese literature, particularly in classical novels like *Journey to the West*, time often operates in a mythic dimension, where supernatural elements, reincarnation, and shifting temporal frames contribute to the narrative’s expansive and dynamic structure. This temporal flexibility allows Eastern narratives to transcend historical constraints, enabling ancient stories to be continuously reinterpreted for modern audiences.

Spatial Fluidity and Boundless Narrative Environments

Just as Eastern narratives exhibit temporal elasticity, they also demonstrate a remarkable flexibility in spatial representation. The concepts of space and time are interconnected with the notion of self-identity, each influencing and shaping the other. "...notion of space and time and that of another self-identity are inter-related and intertwined" (Vatsyayan, p. 3). Rather than treating setting as a fixed and passive backdrop, Eastern storytelling often blurs the boundaries between physical, metaphysical, and psychological spaces. This is particularly evident in Buddhist and Daoist literature, where space is often conceptualized as an extension of the human mind rather than a separate, objective reality. In Daoist texts such as *Zhuangzi*, fantastical landscapes shift and transform according to the protagonist's state of consciousness, reinforcing the idea that reality itself is fluid and ever-changing. Similarly, in Chinese classical poetry, spatial descriptions often serve as emotional landscapes, reflecting the inner lives of characters rather than functioning as mere geographic locations. Even within Indian narrative traditions, space is predominantly conceived in mythological terms. "Since, the location specified for India or Bharata is partly at least mythical and partly sustained by a narrative imagination, the events depicted are ahistorical. Both time and space are mythological, hence the narrative need not be expected to provide statistics about everything" (Paniker, p. 38). Space assumes a heightened significance within Indian narratives, reflecting its integral role in shaping the thematic and structural dimensions of the storytelling tradition. "... (the stage actor), begins his solo narration with a reference to an indefinite past, but the spatial reference is far more specific and more detailed. The Indian narrative can therefore said to be a spatial one" (Paniker, p. 16). Eastern narratives typically commence with an imprecise or ambiguous temporal reference. "Of greater importance in Asian narrative is space. The narrative formula of opening a tale is more specific about place, leaving the exact time imprecise" (Paniker, p. 16). The vastness of space mirrors the limitless nature of human imagination. "... the narrative space is controlled by the imagination, which itself knows no spatial limitation" (Paniker, p. 38).

Japanese Noh theatre and *Haiku* poetry also exemplify this spatial fluidity, using minimalist yet evocative depictions of nature and dreamlike sequences to transcend the physical realm. Based on the story, the empty space of the stage can be transformed by one's imagination into various places and times. "The concept of nothingness and naturalism in Noh can be traced to the philosophical foundations of Zen Buddhism which is typically expressed in Japanese language through the metaphor of *empty space*. Japanese language treasures *ma* or *empty space* that seeks to find hidden meaning in them" (Davies, p. 38). "The circularity of time underlying Noh aesthetics is best expressed in the paradigm that what goes out comes back. The Japanese concept of four seasons accords with this approach of time" (Damodaran A., 2020, p. 12). Noh plays have enjoyed such longevity because the themes are universal. The highly symbolic spaces in Japanese aesthetics often dissolve the distinction between reality and illusion, presence and absence, creating a unique sense of narrative fluidity. In contrast, Indian literature frequently employs liminal spaces, such as forests, rivers, and crossroads, as transformative realms where characters undergo spiritual and psychological metamorphoses. In Indian narrative traditions, "the narrator is not worried too much by the constraints on time, he can concentrate on spatial movements as an indicator of shifts of location. The scene becomes more crucial in the unfolding of the plot than time" (Paniker, p. 16). The elasticity of space in Eastern storytelling allows narratives to exist in multiple dimensions simultaneously, accommodating diverse perspectives and interpretations.

Another key aspect of the highly flexible nature of Eastern narratives is their multiplicity of perspectives and open-ended structures. Unlike Western narratives, which often adhere to a single protagonist-driven plot, Eastern storytelling frequently employs multi-perspectival techniques, in which events are recounted from various viewpoints. This approach is particularly evident in Japanese Rashomon-style narratives, where conflicting accounts of the same event highlight the subjectivity of truth. The Ramayana, for example, exists in numerous regional versions across India, Southeast Asia, and beyond, each offering a different perspective on the characters and events. In Islamic storytelling traditions, such as *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, the use of nested narratives and frame stories creates a kaleidoscopic storytelling experience, where multiple tales unfold within each other like infinite layers of meaning. This openness in storytelling is not just a narrative device but a fundamental worldview—one that resists fixed interpretations and embraces ambiguity, paradox, and contradiction. The flexibility of Eastern narratives allows them to evolve across different cultures and time periods, enabling new generations of storytellers to reinterpret, expand, and transform traditional tales without losing their core essence. This adaptability is one of the reasons why Eastern myths, folktales, and literary works continue to thrive in contemporary digital media, cinema, and transmedia storytelling.

Adaptability in Contemporary Literature, Cinema, and Digital Storytelling

In the modern era, the elasticity of Eastern narrative traditions has allowed them to seamlessly transition into contemporary literature, cinema, and digital storytelling. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean literature, for example, continue to incorporate traditional narrative techniques while adapting to new formats such as web novels, anime, and experimental film. Hayao Miyazaki's films, such as *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke*, exemplify the fusion of ancient mythic storytelling with modern animation techniques, creating narratives that feel both timeless and contemporary. Similarly, Chinese wuxia (martial arts) novels, such as Jin Yong's *Legend of the Condor Heroes*, maintain the classic elements of Chinese heroic storytelling while integrating modern character psychology and intricate world-building.

Korean dramas and films, such as *Parasite* and *Oldboy*, have gained international recognition for their complex narrative structures, which often employ non-linear time, layered storytelling, and ambiguous moral conclusions—hallmarks of Eastern narrative traditions. In his films, Hong Sang-soo articulates the elusive concept of the present moment and constructs a cinematic space where multiple temporalities coexist, fracturing the linear flow of time. The structure of his film *In Our Day* (2023) creates a disruption of linear chronology. This non-linear approach to time mirrors the way memories and recollections often surface in the present, blurring the boundaries between past and present (Kitikunkamjorn, 2024, p. 789). The rise of transmedia storytelling, where narratives unfold across multiple platforms (e.g., anime, manga, video games, and web novels), further demonstrates the remarkable adaptability of Eastern storytelling traditions in the digital age. The popularity of interactive narratives, such as visual novels and AI-generated storytelling, also highlights how Eastern narratives continue to evolve while retaining their core principles of fluidity, multiplicity, and open-endedness.

Conclusion

The highly flexible and elastic nature of Eastern narratives ensures their continued relevance and evolution in an ever-changing cultural landscape. By embracing cyclical time, spatial fluidity, multi-perspectival storytelling, and open-ended structures, Eastern narratives resist

stagnation and maintain an organic adaptability that allows them to be reinterpreted, expanded, and reshaped for each new generation.

Whether in classical mythology, medieval literature, modern cinema, or interactive digital storytelling, Eastern narratives exhibit a timeless dynamism, continuously reinventing themselves while remaining deeply rooted in their philosophical and aesthetic traditions. This narrative elasticity not only distinguishes Eastern storytelling from its Western counterparts but also positions it as a powerful and enduring artistic force capable of transcending cultural and temporal boundaries. As technology advances and new storytelling mediums emerge, the flexibility of Eastern narratives will undoubtedly continue to shape, inspire, and redefine the future of global storytelling.

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