

Cross-Cultural Narratology: A Comparative Study of Storytelling Techniques in Eastern and Western Literature

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<https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2023.12.4.58>

Abstract

This research paper presents a comprehensive comparative study of narratology in eastern and western literature, focusing on the distinct narrative structures, character development, narrative perspectives, and thematic elements that define storytelling in these diverse cultural spheres. Through a systematic analysis of selected literary works from both eastern and western traditions, the study reveals the profound influence of cultural contexts on narrative techniques. Key findings demonstrate that while western narratives often exhibit a linear structure emphasizing individualism and psychological exploration, eastern narratives display a preference for cyclical or non-linear structures, highlighting collective experiences and societal roles. The paper synthesizes these findings to discuss the broader implications of cultural influences on narrative forms. By juxtaposing classical literature, the research explains the variations in character development, narrative perspective, and thematic focus between eastern and western literature. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of understanding these cross-cultural narrative techniques, suggesting avenues for future research in comparative narratology, especially in the context of contemporary global literature and translation studies.

Keywords: Comparative Narratology, Eastern Literature, Western Literature, Narrative Structure, Thematic Elements, Cultural Context, Cross-cultural Study.

Introduction

The intersection of narratology and postcolonial literary criticism is pivotal to understanding the complex dynamics of storytelling across cultures. Narratology, broadly conceived, offers a rich framework for analyzing narrative techniques in postcolonial fiction, contributing to what is termed postcolonial narratology or contextualist narratology (Arsenault, 2023). This field grapples with the tension between form and ideology, where theoretical approaches are often viewed as antithetical to ideological critique (Baroni et al., 2023; Chen & Yang, 2023). The project of contextualist narratology is framed as both an imperative and a challenge, involving theoretical questions about the relevance of context to form and vice versa and methodological questions about the alignment of the goals of criticism and theory (Baroni et al., 2023; Chen & Yang, 2023). The benefits of aligning narrative theory with a vast corpus of texts have been emphasized from various perspectives. Susan Stanford Friedman advocates a transnational narratology that is wary of Eurocentric models and open to the commonalities and differences across cultures (Dwivedi et al. 2012). Patrick Colm Hogan, alternatively, focuses on setting the study of narrative universals on a proper empirical basis. These approaches highlight the complementary nature of studying

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universals and particularities of difference, underlining a bottom-up inductive methodology (Mullick, 2020).

The complexity of narrative as a cognitive form is essential to understanding its dual role as a conservative force and a medium for innovation and critique (Doerr et al., 2013). Narratives operate in a space where the particular and the general interrelate, each giving context and meaning to the other (Souto, 2014). This relationship is critical to both fictional and nonfictional narratives, where the prior generality establishes the narrative particulars, and the particulars can generate a posterior generality, influencing interpretation and historical understanding.

Postcolonial studies, as described by Timothy Brennan, emerge as a porous entity rather than a discrete field, encompassing multiple genealogies and definitions (Willaert, 2012). These studies bring together various colonial and imperial histories, emphasizing the cultural relations between the metropole and the margin and focusing on vectors of knowledge production, representations of self and others, and the constitution of colonial subjectivity (Swartz, 2023). Postcolonial literature, as a part of these studies, has often been critiqued for focusing predominantly on a selective canon of western colonial and Anglophone postcolonial works, potentially neglecting other ideological contestations (Willaert, 2012).

In narratology, focalization is a crucial concept, intersecting information access to narrative events and facts with subjective assumptions, values, and attitudes of characters and narrators (Chen & Yang, 2023). This concept plays a vital role in foregrounding or masking ideological questions, shaping readers' engagement with a narrative through internal and external focalization, and influencing the constitution of social and political situations (Chen & Yang, 2023).

This study aims to explore the complexities of storytelling techniques across eastern and western literary traditions, examining the complex roles of narrative in shaping cultural discourse, ideology, and individual identity. By exploring the intersection of narratology and postcolonial theory, this research offers insights into the dynamics of storytelling, narrative form, and cultural production across diverse literary landscapes.

Theoretical Framework: Narratological Foundations in Eastern and Western Literary Traditions

The theoretical framework of this study is anchored in a comprehensive review of both classical and contemporary narratological theories, drawing upon the seminal works of scholars like Gerard Genette, Mieke Bal, Tzvetan Todorov, and prominent Eastern narrative theorists. This foundation is vital for a nuanced comparative analysis of storytelling techniques across eastern and western literary traditions (Bhuyan et al., 2020; Newman, 2023; Pier, 2010).

Gerard Genette's contributions form a cornerstone of this framework. His conceptualization of narrative discourse, time, and focalization provides essential tools for dissecting narrative structures (Pier, 2010). Genette's theory of focalization, in particular, is instrumental in understanding the alignment of narration with the perceptions or assumptions of characters, a concept crucial for examining ideological underpinnings in narratives (Bahramian et al., 2018; Pier, 2010). His ideas on narrative levels and the distinction between story and discourse offer a robust methodology for dissecting the complexities of narrative construction, which is crucial for comparing eastern and western narratives.

Mieke Bal's contributions further enrich this framework. Bal's emphasis on the role of focalization in narrative, particularly in the intersection of information access and subjective evaluation, highlights the ideological nuances inherent in storytelling (Bal & Van, 2009). Her work provides a distinctive approach to understanding how narratives shape and are shaped by cultural contexts.

This perspective is particularly relevant for analyzing narratives that emerge from diverse cultural backgrounds, allowing for a deeper understanding of how storytelling techniques reflect and influence ideological and cultural frameworks (Denning, 2006).

Tzvetan Todorov's theories offer another layer of analytical depth, especially his work on the fantastic and the uncanny. This opens avenues for exploring how narratives navigate the boundaries between the real and the unreal (Todorov, 1999). Todorov's insights into genre theory and the structural analysis of narrative provide a lens through which the thematic and formal elements of eastern and western narratives can be compared and contrasted (Todorov, 1999).

Eastern narrative theories bring a crucial dimension to this comparative study. The rich narrative traditions of the east, with their unique aesthetic and philosophical underpinnings, offer a contrasting perspective to western theories (Yang, 2008). The study would explore the works of eastern theorists who have delved into the narrative structures unique to their cultures, such as the use of parables, myths, and folklore in storytelling (You et al., 2023). These narratives often embody cyclical or nonlinear time, contrasted with the linear narratives commonly found in western literature. An understanding of these distinctions is pivotal in appreciating the cultural nuances that shape storytelling across different regions.

The integration of postcolonial narratology into this theoretical framework is imperative. As narratology has expanded beyond its structuralist roots, it has increasingly acknowledged the importance of context in narrative analysis. This expansion is evident in the growing intersection of narratology with postcolonial theory, where the focus shifts to how narratives are situated within broader sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Postcolonial narratology emphasizes the importance of considering narratives within the framework of colonial and postcolonial histories and ideologies. It challenges the Eurocentric biases inherent in traditional narratological approaches and calls for a more inclusive, global perspective that respects the diversity of narrative forms and practices across different cultures (Willaert, 2012).

The theoretical framework for this study thus encompasses a broad range of narratological perspectives, from the foundational works of western scholars to the contextually rich insights of eastern narrative theory and postcolonial narratology. This comprehensive approach allows for a multifaceted analysis of storytelling techniques, providing the necessary tools to compare and contrast narrative structures, themes, and ideologies in eastern and western literature. By bridging these diverse theoretical perspectives, the study aims to uncover the underlying narrative mechanisms that reflect and shape cultural identities and experiences.

Historical Context of Eastern and Western Narratology

The historical evolution of narratology in both eastern and western traditions reflects a rich tapestry of cultural, philosophical, and literary influences that have shaped narrative forms and structures. This section delves into key literary movements, historical influences, and the development of narrative techniques, providing a comprehensive overview of how storytelling has evolved across different cultures (Bal & Van, 2009; Baroni et al., 2023; Chen & Yang, 2023; Dwivedi et al., 2012).

In western narratology, the roots can be traced back to ancient Greek and Roman literature, with foundational texts like Homer's epics and the works of Ovid (Cui, 2023). These narratives, with their complex structures and themes of heroism, fate, and morality, laid the groundwork for western narrative traditions (Cui, 2023). Moving into the Middle Ages, the chivalric romances and allegorical tales, such as those by Chaucer and Dante, introduced new narrative techniques and themes. The Renaissance period marked a significant shift with the humanist movement,

emphasizing individual experience and perspective, which influenced narrative forms significantly (Davies, 2023).

The 18th and 19th centuries saw the rise of the novel as a dominant literary form in the West. This period brought a focus on realism and psychological depth, as seen in the works of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Leo Tolstoy (Kucich et al., 2012). The modernist movement in the early 20th century, with figures like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, revolutionized narrative techniques, introducing stream of consciousness and non-linear narratives, challenging traditional notions of time and perspective (Khan et al., n/a).

Eastern narratology, with its diverse literary traditions, offers a contrasting historical narrative. In ancient India, for example, the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana, with their intricate plots and moral dilemmas, have been pivotal in shaping narrative forms (Bal & Van, 2009; Dwivedi et al., 2012). The use of frame narratives, as seen in Panchatantra and Jataka tales, is a distinctive feature of Indian storytelling. Similarly, in ancient China, works like "Journey to the West" and "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" exemplify the integration of folklore, history, and myth, presenting complex narrative structures that have deeply influenced eastern literature (Cheng'en, 2015; Hertel, 1908; Luo & Chen, 2012).

Japanese literature, with its unique forms like the Monogatari and haiku, reflects a distinct approach to narratology. The Heian period's "The Tale of Genji" by Murasaki Shikibu is a seminal work, often considered the world's first novel, showcasing intricate character development and psychological insight (Shikibu, 2015). Middle Eastern narrative traditions, exemplified by "One Thousand and One Nights," incorporate oral storytelling techniques and complex narrative frames, influencing storytelling across cultures (Mahdi, 1995).

The postcolonial period brought a significant shift in both eastern and western narratology. In the West, postmodernist writers like Thomas Pynchon and Italo Calvino explored metafiction and intertextuality, challenging traditional narrative structures and reader's perceptions of reality (Senior). Eastern literature, in the postcolonial context, has seen a blending of traditional narrative forms with modern techniques as authors grapple with themes of identity, colonialism, and globalization. Writers like Salman Rushdie and Haruki Murakami have been instrumental in this fusion, blending myth, history, and contemporary issues in their narratives (Ajeng & Maximilian, 2023).

A continuous exchange of ideas and techniques has marked the interaction between eastern and western narratives. The impact of eastern narratives on western literature can be traced to the works of writers like Jorge Luis Borges and W.B. Yeats, who incorporated elements of eastern philosophy and storytelling in their worksheets. Conversely, the influence of western narrative forms is evident in the modernization of eastern literature, with authors adopting techniques like stream of consciousness and non-linear storytelling.

In conclusion, the historical context of eastern and western narratology reveals a dynamic interplay of cultural, philosophical, and literary influences. This rich history underlines the diversity and complexity of narrative forms and structures, shaping the way stories are told and experienced across different cultures. The evolution of these traditions provides a crucial backdrop for understanding the current state of narratology. It sets the stage for a comparative analysis of storytelling techniques in eastern and western literature.

Comparative Analysis

This section presents a comparative analysis of narratological aspects, focusing on plot structure, character development, narrative perspective, and thematic elements in eastern and western

literature. This examination reveals the nuanced ways in which different cultures approach storytelling.

Plot Structure

Plot structure in eastern and western narratives often shows distinct approaches. Western narratives typically follow a linear structure, with a clear beginning, middle, and end, as seen in the classic three-act structure prevalent in Greek tragedies and Shakespearean plays (Murphy, 2015). This linear approach emphasizes a progression of events leading to a climax and resolution, often reflecting a journey or a transformation.

In contrast, eastern narratives frequently employ cyclical or non-linear structures. For instance, in Indian epics like the Mahabharata, the narrative moves back and forth in time, weaving various sub-plots into a larger, cyclical narrative framework (Cui, 2023). This approach reflects the eastern philosophical concepts of time and life cycles. Similarly, Chinese and Japanese narratives often integrate myths and folklore into their structure, creating layers of stories within stories, as seen in "Journey to the West" and "The Tale of Genji (Shikibu, 2015)."

Character Development

Character development in eastern and western literature often revolves around different archetypes and motivations. Western literature traditionally emphasizes hero archetypes, such as the tragic hero in Greek tragedies or the Byronic hero in romantic literature, characterized by their struggle against external circumstances or personal flaws.

Eastern literature, on the other hand, frequently presents characters deeply rooted in social and familial contexts, reflecting communal values and collective experiences. For example, characters in classical Indian literature often embody dharma (duty), reflecting their roles within a cosmic order. Japanese literature, such as in the works of Yasunari Kawabata, often explores characters' internal worlds, reflecting on existential themes and the human condition.

Narrative Perspective

The use of narrative perspective varies significantly between eastern and western traditions. Western narratives, especially since the modernist era, have experimented extensively with first-person and unreliable narrators, as seen in the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald and James Joyce (Fitzgerald, 2023). This approach allows for a deep exploration of the characters' inner thoughts and unreliable perceptions of reality.

Eastern narratives often employ a third-person omniscient perspective, providing a holistic view of the story and its characters. This perspective is evident in traditional Chinese and Indian literature, where the narrator often has an all-encompassing view of events and characters, reflecting a more collective approach to storytelling (Koebach et al., 2021).

Thematic Elements

Thematic elements in eastern and western narratives often reflect cultural values and philosophical beliefs. Western literature has traditionally explored themes like individualism, freedom, and the quest for knowledge, reflecting western philosophical thought and societal values (Hightet, 2015). In contrast, eastern literature often focuses on themes like harmony with nature, the transience of life, and the interconnection of all beings, reflecting eastern philosophical and spiritual beliefs. Both traditions, however, deal with universal themes such as morality, heroism, and the human condition, albeit through different cultural lenses. For instance, the theme of heroism in western literature, as seen in the works of Homer or the Arthurian legends, often centers on individual

velour and personal achievement (Poland, 1991). In eastern literature, heroism is often portrayed as a fulfilment of duty or moral obligation to the community, as seen in the Bhagavad Gita or the tales of the Samurai (Poland, 1991).

In conclusion, this comparative analysis highlights the rich diversity in narratological aspects across eastern and western literature. Understanding these differences and similarities provides a deeper appreciation of how cultural contexts shape narrative techniques and storytelling traditions.

Table 1: Comparative analysis of narratological aspects in eastern and western literature

Aspect	Western Literature	Eastern Literature
Plot Structure	- Linear narrative structure (beginning, middle, end)	- Cyclical or non-linear structures
	- Emphasis on progression and climax	- Integration of myths and folklore
Character Development	- Focus on hero archetypes (e.g., tragic hero)	- Characters rooted in social/familial contexts
	- Emphasis on individual struggle and transformation	- Reflect communal values and collective experiences
Narrative Perspective	- Experimentation with first-person and unreliable narrators	- Frequent use of third-person omniscient perspective
	- Exploration of inner thoughts and perceptions	- Holistic view of story and characters
Thematic Elements	- Themes of individualism, freedom, knowledge	- Themes of harmony with nature, transience of life
	- Exploration of morality, heroism, human condition	- Focus on interconnection of beings, moral obligation

This table provides an overview of how eastern and western literatures differ and converge in their approach to plot structure, character development, narrative perspective, and thematic elements. While western narratives often emphasize linear progression, individual struggle, and first-person perspectives, eastern narratives tend to focus on cyclical structures, communal values, and third-person omniscient narration. Both traditions, however, engage with universal themes like morality, heroism, and the human condition, though from different cultural viewpoints.

Case Studies

For an in-depth analysis, select works from eastern and western literature will be chosen. These case studies will illustrate the application of theoretical concepts in specific literary works, offering concrete examples of the comparative narrative techniques discussed earlier.

Western Literature: "Ulysses" by James Joyce

James Joyce's "Ulysses" is an exemplary western narrative that demonstrates modernist techniques and innovations in narrative structure and perspective (Gifford & Seidman, 1988). The novel's use of stream of consciousness, nonlinear narrative, and complex character development aligns with western narrative traditions of exploring individual psychology and subjective experiences (Dwivedi et al.). Joyce's manipulation of time and his emphasis on the inner lives of characters offer insights into western approaches to character development and narrative perspective.

Eastern Literature: "The Tale of Genji" by Murasaki Shikibu

"The Tale of Genji" by Murasaki Shikibu is a classic of Japanese literature and an excellent example of eastern narrative techniques (Shikibu, 2015). The work's use of an omniscient narrative voice, its focus on the cyclical nature of life, and its deep exploration of courtly society reflect eastern storytelling traditions. The character development in "The Tale of Genji," particularly its focus on interpersonal relationships and societal roles, provides a stark contrast to the individualistic focus seen in western narratives like "Ulysses" (Shikibu, 2015).

Western Literature: "In Search of Lost Time" by Marcel Proust

Marcel Proust's "In Search of Lost Time" offers a comprehensive exploration of memory and subjective experience, integral to western narrative forms (Marchant, 2006). Proust's detailed psychological analysis of his characters and the use of reflective, introspective narrative techniques showcase the western emphasis on internal character development and the exploration of time in a non-linear fashion.

Eastern Literature: "One Hundred Years of Solitude" by Gabriel García Márquez

Although written by a Latin American author, "One Hundred Years of Solitude" incorporates many narrative techniques prevalent in eastern literature (Márquez, 2018). The novel's magical realism, non-linear plot, and intergenerational narrative reflect the eastern storytelling tradition's focus on cyclical time and collective experience. García Márquez's integration of myth and reality and his focus on the broader historical and communal context provide a useful comparison to western narratives.

Western Literature: "Hamlet" by William Shakespeare

Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is a classic example of western narrative structure, character development, and thematic exploration. The play's linear narrative, focusing on individual struggle, existential dilemmas, and exploration of themes like morality and revenge, illustrate key aspects of western narratology (Shakespeare, 2019).

Eastern Literature: "Journey to the West" by Wu Cheng'en

"Journey to the West," a classic Chinese novel, embodies eastern narrative techniques with its integration of mythology, folklore, and cyclical plot structure (Cheng'en, 2015). The episodic nature of the narrative, along with its allegorical themes and collective character dynamics, offers a contrast to the individualistic and linear narratives common in western literature.

These case studies highlight the application of various narrative techniques and theoretical concepts in both eastern and western literary works. By examining these texts, the study provides concrete examples of how different cultures approach storytelling, offering a comparative perspective on narratology across cultural boundaries.

Table 2: Comparative case studies in eastern and western literature

Case Study	Work	Author	Region	Key Features
1	"Ulysses"	James Joyce	Western	Modernist techniques, stream of consciousness, nonlinear narrative, complex character development
2	"The Tale of Genji"	Murasaki Shikibu	Eastern	Omniscient narrative voice, cyclical narrative, focus on interpersonal relationships and societal roles
3	"In Search of Lost Time"	Marcel Proust	Western	Exploration of memory, subjective experience, introspective narrative, psychological analysis
4	"One Hundred Years of Solitude"	Gabriel García Márquez	Eastern influence	Magical realism, non-linear plot, intergenerational narrative, integration of myth and reality
5	"Hamlet"	William Shakespeare	Western	Linear narrative, existential themes, focus on individual struggle and morality
6	"Journey to the West"	Wu Cheng'en	Eastern	Mythology and folklore integration, cyclical plot structure, allegorical themes, collective character dynamics

This table provides a succinct overview of the selected case studies, highlighting their regional origins and key narrative features. These works exemplify the distinct narrative techniques and thematic focuses that characterize eastern and western literature, providing a basis for comparative analysis.

Discussion

The findings from the comparative analysis and case studies offer profound insights into the influence of cultural contexts on narrative structures and techniques in eastern and western literature. This discussion aims to synthesize these insights and explore the broader implications of the study.

Cultural and Philosophical Foundations

The distinct narrative structures in western literature, exemplified by linear and progression-oriented storytelling in works like "Ulysses" and "Hamlet," can be traced back to enlightenment values that prioritize individualism and introspection. These narratives often focus on the psychological development and existential struggles of individual characters, reflecting a deep-seated cultural emphasis on personal identity and self-discovery.

In contrast, eastern literature, as seen in "The Tale of Genji" and "Journey to the West," often adopts cyclical or non-linear structures. This narrative style is deeply rooted in eastern philosophies such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, which value harmony, collective well-being, and the acceptance of life's cyclical nature. Characters are frequently portrayed within the context of their relationships and societal roles, emphasizing interconnectedness and communal values.

Historical Context and Evolution

The development of these narrative styles is also tied to their respective historical contexts. The Renaissance era in the west, with its emphasis on humanism and individual expression, significantly influenced the evolution of western narrative forms. Meanwhile, the Heian period in Japan, among other historical epochs in the east, played a crucial role in shaping eastern narrative techniques, where storytelling served not only as entertainment but also as a reflection of societal order and moral values.

Cross-cultural Influences and Hybridization

In contemporary literature, there is a growing trend of cross-cultural influences and hybridization in narrative techniques. Western authors are increasingly experimenting with non-linear storytelling, while eastern writers are integrating aspects of individual psychological development. This blending of narrative styles reflects a globalized world where cultural exchange is constantly reshaping literary traditions.

Reader Reception and Interpretation

The reception and interpretation of these narratives can vary significantly across different cultural contexts. Readers familiar with linear storytelling may find non-linear narratives challenging, and vice versa. This highlights the importance of cultural literacy in appreciating the diverse narrative structures that define global literature.

Global Literature and Cross-cultural Understanding

Understanding these narrative differences and similarities is crucial for a comprehensive appreciation of world literature. It fosters cross-cultural understanding and highlights the universal themes and human experiences that transcend cultural boundaries, even within the framework of distinct narrative traditions.

Future Directions in Literary Studies

Future research could explore the comparative analysis of emerging authors from eastern and western cultures, examining how modern influences are shaping their narrative styles. Additionally, the impact of digital media on narrative structures across different cultures presents a fertile ground for exploration, considering how technology is redefining storytelling in the global context.

In conclusion, this study not only sheds light on the distinct narrative techniques of eastern and western literature but also opens avenues for further exploration into the dynamic and ever-evolving landscape of global literature.

Conclusion

This research highlights the critical importance of understanding the varied narrative techniques found in eastern and western literature. It reveals that narrative structures, character development, narrative perspectives, and thematic elements are profoundly influenced by their cultural milieus. In western literature, there is a marked preference for individualistic perspectives and linear narrative structures, as seen in classics like "Ulysses" and "Hamlet." These narratives often focus on the journey and psychological development of individual characters, reflecting a cultural emphasis on personal identity and self-discovery.

Conversely, eastern narratives, exemplified by works like "The Tale of Genji" and "Journey to the West," typically exhibit a collective orientation. Their narrative structures are often cyclical or non-linear, mirroring the societal values and philosophical traditions of eastern cultures. These narratives focus on the interconnectedness of characters within their social and familial structures, highlighting collective experiences over individual ones.

These distinctions underscore the richness and diversity of storytelling techniques across different cultures. By adopting a comparative approach in narratology, this study illuminates how these narrative methods reflect broader cultural contexts and values. Understanding and appreciating these differences is crucial for a deeper comprehension of world literature and the diverse societies that have shaped them.

For future research directions, expanding the scope of this comparative study to include a wider range of literary traditions would be invaluable. This expansion could involve examining lesser-known works or emerging genres that blend eastern and western narrative techniques, thus reflecting the increasingly globalized nature of contemporary literature.

Furthermore, an analysis of the role of translation in these narratives presents a promising avenue for research. Translation plays a critical role in how these stories are received and interpreted across cultures. Investigating this aspect could offer deeper insights into the nuances of cross-cultural narratology and how narratives are reshaped for different audiences.

Additionally, exploring the impact of digital media and modern storytelling platforms on these narrative structures could provide a contemporary perspective. As technology changes the way stories are told and consumed, it may also be influencing the evolution of narrative techniques in both eastern and western literature.

In conclusion, this study not only enriches our understanding of global literature but also contributes to the broader dialogue between cultures. By fostering a more inclusive and nuanced approach to literary studies, we can better appreciate the diverse ways in which stories are told and experienced around the world.

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