

**Time and Narrative in Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982)**

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**Abstract**

*This study sets out to analyse the notions of 'time' and 'narrative' in Richard Attenborough's Gandhi (1982), in particular it attempts to find out the relation between them in a film narrative. This study seeks to explain issues such as, what effect does deliberate violation of historical order of events achieve in a (film) narrative? What factors influence the 'author' to make choices in terms of duration of an event?, Does the 'frequency' help readers or audience decode the narrative 'motif'? Does the titular repetition address the issue of appreciating the 'motif'?*

**Keywords:** narratology, time, duration, order, narrative repetition

Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982), as a historical narrative, appears to have employed a linear temporal structure. However, he makes use of analepsis and prolepsis with ideological commitments to fulfill. As a retelling by a British director, it is likely to be pregnant with ideological projection of the 'author.' Therefore, this study is an attempt to analyse the relationships between time and the thematic and ideological elements of narrative. More specifically, the study investigates how time as a device can manipulate and aid infuse ideology in the film narrative. The focus of the study stems from the idea that when the postcolonial subject is the 'subject' of the narrative, the ideological infusion is imperative. The hypothesis that follows is that analysing the fundamental aspects of time proposed by Genette namely, 'order,' 'duration,' and 'frequency' and Ricoeur's 'within-time-ness' will reveal the ideological 'plot' behind the narrative and events are fueled to arrive at the designed destination under the disguise of historical 'retelling.' Having stated the statement of the issue, in the following I explain briefly the rationale for choosing *Gandhi* and analyzing the ideological commitment of the 'author' in the narrative.

First, the analysis of *Gandhi* is driven by the fact it is a narrative about a historical figure which unfolds a history of independence of the Indian subcontinent. Unlike fiction, the construction of history is the reconstruction of the past. The historical narrator (author) volunteers to remember and recalls the pastness of the past. This reenactment as the act of rethinking not reliving the past is a reality of the past. As history is primarily the study of the past time, the study of past which the film unfolds is quite necessary and appropriate. Second, Herman (2013) defines ideology as “the frame of values informing the narrative.” The underlying ideological postulation is that the man who had led the nation into freedom had no freedom to live in a ‘free’ India. The study arrives at this hypothesis while historically evaluating the postcolonial ‘constructs’ such as history, civilization, and the British rule. History of Indian subcontinent, dating back to 7000 BC, has been written by Friedrich Max Müller, a British agent who projected that Vedic corpus was the foundation of Hindu civilization. Along with the idea of birth of civilization, the birth of nationalism was ‘perpetuated’ by a British writer, James Mill in his *The History of British India* (1818). He periodizes Indian history into Hindu civilization, Muslim civilization and the British Raj, from which was born the theory of two nation-state i.e. Hindu vs Muslim. This communal ideology presented to Indians in the initial scale helped to establish a sense of nationalism or anti-colonial Indian nationalism. It was later manipulated into believing that a new identity of two separate civilizations i.e. Hindu vs Muslim should be formulated. This notion of nationhood peppered with the idea of Communalism was perpetuated and supported by the colonial power in full scale. This ‘ideology’ was appealing to these two hostile communities. The result was the formation of two opposing movements i.e. ‘Hindu Mahasabha’ and ‘Muslim League.’ The rest is the history of so called non-violent independence from the British and its aftermath- the bloodiest, horrendous post-independent events in its entire history. This is precisely the film narrative’s sole ‘motif’ that it captures and presents to the global audience under the pretext of the life-story of non-violent *mahatma* Gandhi. In the following section, this inquiry is triggered by the above hypothetical statement to investigate whether or not the narrative is impregnate with such ideological make-up.

In this study, as stated earlier, I will begin defining different levels of narrative’s temporal structure, along with an in-depth study on events or episodes against Attenborough’s temporal ‘device.’

Genette categorizes time framework into three sections: order, duration and frequency. First, order is the arrangements of sequencing of events in the story and the arrangement in the narrative. It can be chronological- where one can narrate events as they occurred. Folk tales in common are narrated in the order of ‘real’ events, for instance, in

Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Second, non-chronological- one can recount events out of order. The western literatures right from Homeric epic prefer to "use the beginning *in medias res*," (Genette, 182) and have flashbacks to fill the 'gaps.' One can easily notice film's 'temporal narrative mode' and its motif right from the first movements in *Gandhi*. The film begins with a statement about its *subject*,

No man's life can be encompassed in *one telling* (emphasis mine). There is no way to give each year its allotted weight, to include each event, each person who helped to shape a life time. What can be done is to be faithful in spirit to the record and try to find one's way to the heart of man.... (Attenborough, 1982).

It is a self-declaration that the narrative is a faithful record of finding out the 'heart of man' and his 'intention' for his nation. But in the end it belies its claims. Let me explain the 'heart' of the narrative. The story-line begins in the fine evening on 30 January, 1948. The first episodic event unfolds in the narrative 'order' is the assassination of Gandhi. The camera rolls on in the square at the Birla's House, where the 'epic' hero in his usual gait was introduced to the audience. Alongside, the 'sole' Machiavellian, a Hindu fanatic Nathuram Godse appears on screen at 1:32 seconds on film-timeline, approaching Gandhi and wishing him 'namaste.' The killing takes place at 4:12. In the narrational flow, the first event in the organization of the narrative is the last moment in the story of life of hero-Gandhi. Then the temporal sequence continues. It is his funeral historically reported to have been attended by one-million people lined up for five-miles on the banks of Jamuna river which was a real footage in the narrative. The third event is a flashback, going back to 55 years, where Gandhi travels around South Africa in a train. The event becomes dramatic, when we see him thrown out the coach in a railway station, since he was traveling in the first class coach meant only for the whites. The fourth episodic event is where he was found interrogating with his fellow Indians and the British colleagues that it was not fair not to be permitted to travel in a first class or walk on the pavements as citizens of the Empire.

*Gandhi* begins with a crisscrossing, where the *order* of narrated events (NE) differs from the order of historical events (HE). Thus the relationship between the time of events and the time of narrative could be figured as N(arrative)E 1= H(istorical)E (last day); NE2

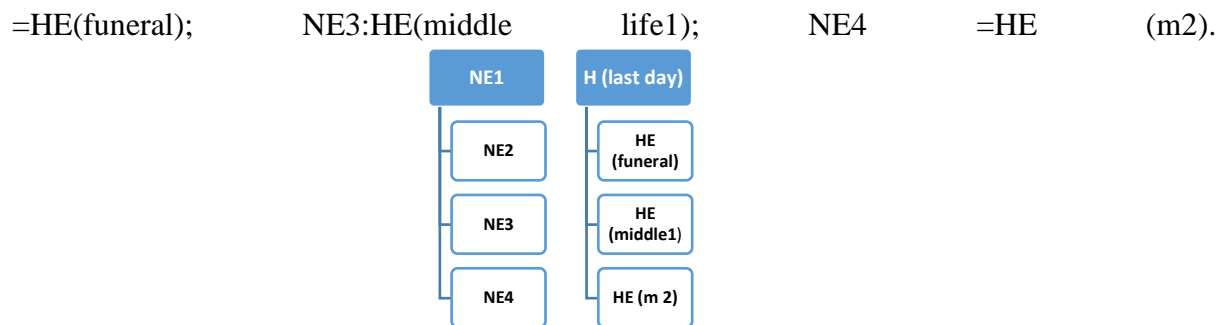


Figure 1 The *order* of appearance of narrative events and historical events

What we find here is narratology approves of ‘diegetic’ or film-time ordering that is independent of real time order, resulting in an independent time-ordering. The question we should raise here: Why is this deliberate violation of historical order of events in film narrative? I will respond to this as I summarize the motive behind ‘narrative motif’ later.

After the introductory events, the sequence weaves backward with analepsis and ellipses, laying foundation for the story to come alive. Thus a fusion of time is built into the film from the very beginning: chronological time, or time pertaining to the diegesis, which operates syntagmatically, and achronological time, which operates paradigmatically. In the first event where Gandhi is assassinated followed by his funeral establishes chronological time which in historical time had happened on 30 January 1948. And then the temporal order changes, dating back to his life span around 1898 in South Africa. There is a spacio-temporal shift in the narrative. Here it suffices to note that thus a consciousness of the weight of the past has been thrown onto the present. The story has to continue with the chronological sequence in order to arrive at this conclusion through a sequential plot. As Paul Ricoeur defines, plot is the “intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in any story” (Ricoeur, 1984:174). As such the plot is characterized by temporal complexity. Thus plot becomes the crossing point joining temporality and narrativity. A story is made of events to the extent that plot makes events in any story. Ricoeur states, “to tell and follow a story is already to reflect upon events in order to encompass them in successive wholes” (p. 174). The question here is, what sort of ‘whole’ is the narrative *Gandhi* aimed at? As it is clear, there is only one ‘whole’ aiming at the culmination to the ‘event’- assassination, unfolding more than fifty-eight narrative episodes summarizing the life span from 1893 to 1948 in 3:14:00 minutes.

Another temporality, where author's ideology can possibly be seen is the *duration* allotted for the episodic events. Genette defines 'duration' as "number of pages per duration of event" (Genette, 1983:186). For a film narrative, I define it as number of seconds or minutes per duration of event. It helps assess the effect of narrational flow, such as acceleration, deceleration, stasis, and ellipsis. We know that the relation between the occurrence of narrated events and the real events is a complex issue. A narrative unit set in a literary text cannot "really be said to possess a definite duration" (186), as duration varies from reader to reader while reading. Whereas it is quite different in the case of film narrative. Let me elaborate the different elements of 'duration.' According to Genette, the combination of historical and narrative *duration* can be achieved through the following fundamental forms: *summary*, *dramatic scene*, *narrative stasis* and *ellipsis*. *Summary* means the narrative duration is less compared to historical duration, and events are reduced to the main linking events or episodes..... i.e ( $NE < HE$ ). It can be of variable length. By summarizing some events, acceleration is geared up. In *Gandhi*, almost all the episodic events are summarized into compact duration. It really accelerates the tragic hero's life events. Second, *dramatic scene* means, "the scene where the narrative and historical time are supposed to be the nearly equal" (188). Narrative time is more or less equal to the historical event i.e ( $NE = HE$ ). Conversations and significant events are usual examples. The purpose of 'scene' is for deceleration. In the film narrative, the assassination of Gandhi is narrated more or less in the same duration of the historical event. Again, Gandhi's experience of racism, where he was pushed out of the train in an unknown railway station is a classic example for *dramatic scene*. Here the duration of both narrative and historical ( $NE$  and  $HE$ ) events is likely to match. Third, *narrative stasis*, where the narrative duration is more than the historical event in order to provide more description of what is happening i.e. ( $NE = n, HE = 0$ ). The historical event is interrupted to make room exclusively for narratorial discourse. Static descriptions fall into this category. The second narrative event is his funeral, where BBC announces the death of Gandhi as,

the object of this massive tribute is ..to a private man without wealth, without property, without official title, or office. Mahatma Gandhi is not the Commander of Armies nor a ruler of a vast land; he could not boast any scientific achievements or artistic gifts, yet men, governments, dignitaries from all over the world have joined hands today to pay homage to this little brown man in the loin cloth who has led this country to freedom (*Gandhi*, 1982).

Such a long announcement interrupts the narrative flow, but adds gravity to the event. Fourth, *ellipsis*, "consist(s) of a certain amount of historical time covered in a zero amount of narrative" (188). In other words, the narrative zips absolutely some part of the historical event

i.e. (NE=0, HE=n). The narrative duration is greatly reduced, compared to the historical duration, absorbing a large amount of historical time in the process of *ellipsing*. Ellipsis is a quite common form of duration in *Gandhi*.

As we counted the *order* of recounted events earlier, here I will calculate the narrational flow based on the quantity of *duration* assigned for the narrated event and supposedly the time duration of the historical event. The opening scene (event) happens on a single day, at 5:17 pm on January, 30 1948. On screen, the duration allotted for event was between 1:32 and 4:12 seconds, unfolding the tragic moment in the life of hero. The next event, funeral procession for Gandhi was shown for 2:30 sec, despite the fact that the duration in real time must have been not less than a few hours. The next episodic event was in South Africa where the hero experiences humiliation through discrimination first time. This dramatic event is presented for about 2:45 sec. The fourth event happens on screen for 1:40 sec., followed by Indian congress party in South Africa where he was burning the passes asking for equal citizenship rights of the Empire- up to 15:50.

What can we understand from this inventory? First, there is an extensive shift in relative duration. For instance a few minutes for longer events in history and longer scene for relatively a shorter event. Second, the ‘duration’ allotted for the episodic events in South Africa shown in the film is about 30:44 sec in the place for narrating the life time duration’ lasting for from 1893 to 1915. The twenty-two year history events are narrated in little more than a half-an-hour in the narrative. The historical time has been successfully elapsed due to the reason that the narrative episodes were short and focused. As a result there are many ellipses in the so called episode in South Africa. This is called “increasing discontinuity of the narrative” (Genette, 1983: 187). This discontinuity is very obvious in the ‘first part’ of the film. The event where Gandhi was shown first time in loin cloth is when John met him in prison. Historically he had taken a vow not to adore him with western or Indian aristocratic attire when he happened to witness destitution where women did not afford to have upper garments on 21.09.1921 in Madurai (*my city*). The plight of Indians under the British Raj was tactfully ellipsed in the narrative. In the following, let me elaborate the analysis of ‘duration’ further.

Narratorial duration can be used in varying degree. For instance, a ‘scene’ can be combined with ‘summary.’ Jawaharlal’s conversational engagement with Gandhi, requesting him to end his days-long fast is the ‘summary’ of his fasting enterprise. Duration allotted to narrative events reveals the significance attested to the event - more number of pages (print) or minutes (film), more importance assigned. The longest event is the historic 240-mile salt march on the western coast up to Dandi is shown from 2:04:30 to 2:12:12 (7 min.: 42 sec.).



The longest duration allotted to the *event* reveals the relative significance assigned namely, that his deterministic endeavor of gathering mass through relentless act is the hall mark of his personality and patriotism. The second longest event is the very first public demonstration, where he was burning the passes asking for equal citizen of the Empire from 08:16 upto 15:50 (7 min.:34 sec.), showcases and summarizes the personhood of Gandhi, preparing the audience to believing that public demonstration through *ahimsa* (non-violence) is in his vein with which he is going to secure, otherwise unimaginable, freedom to his mother land. In the line, events such as, 'his visit to the poorest farmer's house and subsequent arrest' are running for more than five minutes, proclaiming that he is committed to his countrymen. A host of events such as arriving in Indian attire; his *discovery* of India; being introduced at the National Congress party; Jallianwala Bagh massacre (killing 1516 with 1560 bullets); fasting unto death at Calcutta are all the evidential events to project Gandhi as the emerging sole *maha-athma* (great-soul) who does not deserve the kind of end meted out to him. In other words, the choice of events from the historical account and the narrative duration allotted to each of them heightens the emotional appeal locally and globally –one of author's intentions.

While addressing the issue of narrative time in appreciating the 'motif' of work, one has to take into account of the narrative *repetition*. I will discuss the third narrative temporality –*frequency*. Genette defines it as "the relative frequency of the narrated events and of the narrative sections that report them" (189). The quite common form of narration is narrating an event that occurs once. He calls this "singulative narrative" (*recit singulatif*). In other words, narrating once what happened once ( $NE_1 / HE_1$ ) or relating  $n$  times what happened  $n$  times ( $NE_n / HE_n$ ). The film is saturated with *recit singulatif*, such as Gandhi experiencing racism first time, being bullied by the white teenagers in South Africa, arriving at Bombay (India), 'discovering' India, Jallianwala Bagh massacre, inauguration of Swadeshi movement, historic Salt march, leaving for the round table conference, Jinnah's partition proposal.

A narrative can also tell several times, with or without variations, an event that happened only once. He calls it *repetitive narrative*, where "the story repetitions exceed in number the repetitions of events" (Genette, 1983: 189). In other words, recounting more than once what happened once ( $NE_n / HE_1$ ). The most significant repetitive event in the narrative is the opening scene where Gandhi is shot with a single shot, followed by the funeral sequence. Why did the 'author' choose to repeat 'killing' event as the dominant repetition? forms the basis for this enquiry. Another recurrent image - the *chakra* (the spinning wheel) has been shown repetitively throughout the narrative. Gandhi is often found to be spinning his own *khadi* (the homespun cloth). The charkha was the physical embodiment and symbol

of Gandhian Economics –*Swadeshi* (self-sufficiency). It embodies the dignity of labor, equality, unity, as all Gandhian volunteers were to spin each day as British control of India was rooted in control of indigenous industries such as textiles. The ‘projection’ in a subtle sense is that Gandhi’s *chakra* brought India freedom.

Narrative repetition not only helps to intensify the shock of the plot as in the case of the first scene, but also works paradigmatically, cutting vertically through the syntagmatic linear act of watching. The repeated noise of shooting echoes loudly throughout the narrative. It becomes inevitably linked with other scenes of violence, notably, the killings of women and children in two opposite partition camps in the post-independent context. Gandhi said in the film: “An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind.” Gandhi being arrested and jailed was narrated once, whereas historically he was imprisoned for ten times. The ‘projection’ here is that Gandhi was not at all threatened and silenced by the British for his ‘lead’ in the freedom struggle. Genette labels it as, *iterative narrative* - “in which a single narrative assertion covers several recurrences of the same event or, to be more precise, of several analogical events considered only with respect to what they have in common, it is called *iterative narrative (recit iteratif)*” (Genette, 1983: 189). In other words, relating one time what happened several times (NE<sub>1</sub> / HE<sub>n</sub>).

Whether a historical event is narrated in the same *order*, with the same *duration* as happened historically and with the same *frequency* and as *singulative* narrative or the *iterative* narrative, this is absolutely impossible that events can be narrated with temporal accuracy. This is the beauty of reality by arresting the beauty of the presence of the present in artistic expression. Narrative art has the ability to replicate the historical moment since in reality no reality repeats in itself. It is due to the fact that any historical event becomes historical because of temporality or historicity as Ricoeur calls it, and no event gets repeated in the history of events. But on the contrary the narrative event can repeat the same historic event any number of times in narrativity. Then, why can then events alone be repeated in narratives? Might be due to the fact that the paradox of the triplicate presence of ‘present’ in the history of events, that is to say, the present in the past, present in the present, and present in the future. The idea here is when the present becomes a reality in history, there is no way an event becomes past. In other words every event is present historically, it becomes past only in the presence of the present. Even then the presence of the present cannot report the present of the past for it is a future event. While anticipating a future event, it denotes that there is an element of present involved, so the future event happens; automatically it becomes present that it would become a past in the future as well. Events are



fluid as moves across diachronically. When such complexity is present in the historicity, the articulation of narrative events messes itself with imperfection, as it is able to see that the perfect *time* is impossible. The question that follows the understanding of complexity of narrating event, Can we claim that there is a relational representation of historical and narrative events in *Gandhi*? The only one illustration possible is the assassination of Gandhi. As a historical event, it is fluid as it is embedded within the cosmological time frame, whereas the narrated event which happened in the past is narrated in the presence of the present: it stays forever. This film narrative employs this “in” time narrative technique at ‘dramatic scene(s), which becomes an evidential event to reveal the ideological undercurrent.

Narrowing down to a conclusion, I recall what Ricoeur states that a narrative conclusion is the pole of attraction of the entire development, neither to be deducted nor predicted. Rather than predictable, a conclusion must be acceptable, “looking back from the conclusion to the episode leading up to it, we have to be able say that ending required these sorts of events, and this chain of actions’ (Ricoeur, 1984: 170). In *Gandhi*, the end, predictably enough, is a chronological linear sequence ending with temporal sequence. It is the true ending with a classic narrative closure. The story does not end *in medias res*, leaving in suspense any narrative possibilities as the killer is noticeably seen by the audience, requires no participation to give a final shape. Ricoeur’s definition of predictable conclusion is reached as the audiences are left with the nothing to define or predict. The presence of narrative closure to the story narrated in chronological time helps audience to arrive at meanings, dimensions and histories.

Why does the director choose a ‘linear-time structure? He chose this particular temporal mode because his narrative ‘subject’ is the life story of the most influential person in the history of India and most importantly the worst assassination history of the world. From this perspective, my argument takes a reversal that there is no ending, in as much as there is no classic narrative closure. The absence of narrative closure, meaning the death of Gandhi, though appears to be an end, is the beginning of the story of ‘independent nations.’ It calls for the reason why Gandhi was killed and demands the audience attention and compels them to create meanings. Thus the audience’s critical sense is awakened, leading to this question. This brings us to basic reason for a linear –time structure. Attenborough chose this temporal time mode because he is going to leave with the audience to deconstruct. It is the audience who have to use a kaleidoscope to piece together the events culmination to the ‘dramatic scene’ in order to arrive at some sort of ‘whole’ in the plot. This act of deconstruction blurs the boundary line between the director and the audience. Through this

act of deconstruction, ‘reading’ becomes an act of construction as the audience ‘writes’ the film narrative through the prism of their imaginative understanding of narrative and time. That’s why, the story simply stops being narrated, *in medias res*, leaving in suspense multiple narrative possibilities, requiring audience participation to arrive at a possible closure. We have no way of knowing what would finally happen to these two nations- India and Pakistan after partition. I arrive at this open-ended closure, simply because it ends with where it began. In fact, Attenborough’s intention might not to *tell* a story of colonial India, but he is using ‘Gandhi’s’ story. Ricoeur’s definition of a predictable conclusion is reversed, as the ending is simply left to the audience to define or predict -what would be the ‘story’ of Indian subcontinent without ‘Gandhi’ and the Empire? The ultimate projection is to show that the hostility between these two nations will see no end as the Father of nation has been put to eternal rest. What is in store is unrest and chaos. On the contrary, the British were projected as peacekeepers between the two permanently hostile, aggressive nations, constantly fighting at each other. This notion has been highlighted showing violent scenes frequently for long ‘duration.’

While commenting on the role of narrator, the narrative voice in Genette’s term *heterodiegetic* is employed where the narrator is absent from the story he tells. A structuring of narrative time that highlights certain events so as to imply a chain of narrative causality known to the storyteller but as yet unknown to the listener or reader—will serve as a continuous reminder that the story is already being grasped as a whole: e.g. the opening scene in *Gandhi*. The choice of detached third person narrator is deliberate in order to avoid unnecessary comments on the life and events of the ‘hero.’ Attenborough has chosen this kind of narrative time-frame which helps him not to shift perspectives and temporal levels. This temporality does not create any barrier between the character(s) and events in the narrative and the audience. A linear structure without changing the narrative voice, thus giving audience access to the minds of the characters is a technique that seems to be simple, but helps audience to feel the weight of the past or each event, culminating onto the climax or the dramatic scene –the assassination of Gandhiji. Thus, this episode becomes the striking point in the ‘whole’ of narrative that an act of violence is a death knoll for non-violence. It is the narrative thread which weaves the entire episodic narration. It leaves unsaid that violence begets violence. Gandhi grating approval for the separation of Indian ‘subcontinent’ into different nations infuriates the Hindutva members of the Congress and the consequence is the demise of non-violence itself- the killing of Gandhi. The narrative pleads for a signification that Gandhi was shot dead not by the British, but by an Indian.

As a postcolonial subject-audience, I am convinced of the fact that the nine Oscar-winning *Gandhi* film narrative is no exception or surprise in painting what the juries of Oscar and the audience from the other side of global North could have wanted Indian subcontinent to be seen after the ‘demise’ of both the Father of nation and the British Empire: it’s a timely ‘project.’

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