

Life of Pi: A Spiritual Journey from Novel to Film

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Abstract: Yann Martel's Life of Pi won the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2002 and its movie adaptation with the screenplay by David Magee in 3D came in 2012 which was directed by Ang Lee. It is a realistic fiction; a story about animal verses humanity, religion, belief, and survival. In its novel and film form Life of Pi is entirely the journey of hope, spirituality and faith. Yann Martel in the novel kept comparing the animal world with the human world and in end humanity won. It is said that the movie is a lively source which can stimulate our perspective directly and instantly while fiction (novel) does it with patience and Life of Pi in both versions do it miraculously. Martel said at the time of the movie release that novel is completely unfilmable as it is having a tiger and water. But Ang Lee proved that for a good director nothing is difficult. With the help of 3D he had done the spectacular work but it too was not easy for him as, it took Ang Lee three thousand workers and four years to prepare the movie. To all the people related with novel and film, it was educational and spiritual journey.

Keywords: Journey, Spiritual, believe, faith, God

After rejected by at least five London publishing houses Yann Martel, a Canadian novelist's *Life of Pi* was accepted by Knopf Canada and published in September 2001. The UK

addition was chosen for the prestigious Man Booker Prize for fiction in 2002. In 2003, Fox 2000 Pictures planned to adapt the novel into a movie and gave the responsibility to an executive named Elizabeth Gabler who kept the project alive. Before accepted by Ang Lee it was rejected by three well-known directors for various reasons. The name of the directors is M. Night Shyamalan, Alfonso Cuarón, Jean-Pierre Jeunet. Finally, it was handed over to Ang Lee and David Magee was hired to write the screen-play. Ang Lee as a director responded positively and creatively with the marvelous work of Yann Martel and partly of David Magee.

A work of skillful art is a spiritual journey for the reader, audience and the spectators. And Pi Patel's on-screen and off-screen journey is a journey which make you think on the spiritual aspect of life. Both writer and the director made it very clear that they did not believe in the God, but they believed in God in an abstract form and they strive throughout the journey of creation (novel as well as film) very hard to portray same things before the reader and the audience. Martel spent thirteen months in India, doing research, visiting various mosques, churches, temples and zoos, and spent two years reading texts and castaway stories, before writing the book *The Life of Pi*. In short Martel did research and put his soul into the novel. This might be reason that the story of Pi Patel is more credible. In the case of Ang Lee too it took a lot of time to pursue him to take the novel for direction. Lee specially has the reputation to work on the projects which he finds fascinating. In the interview with Rajeev Mansad Lee accept that he choose the material which fascinates him, he further add that, it might be because the unfulfilled romantic things in the past or the curiosity or anything else which he is not sure about made him to work on such projects and as a director he didn't wanted to be judged, what he prefers is to flow on with the time.

Life of Pi, truly speaking is a mind-boggling story. It always talks of god and the spirituality but still it is not directly taking you to that. It is directly and indirectly about the god though not the structured god but the abstract god, the one which is convenient with everyone. Through the protagonist, author constantly talks about the higher power but never allows us to directly see that power. Yann Martel made Piscine Molitor Patel, in short Pi Patel to stand on the ground which is not bothered with religious houses but believes in the house where we finally have to go and which is supposed to be final goal of every one while surviving. To understand the novel we have to go in the past life of Pi Patel, a person who proved that nothing is impossible if you have confidence in yourself. The novel starts with the Yann Martel's introduction about how he came in contact with the Pi Patel's uncle named Francis Adirubasamy who was a champion swimmer and the

person who said to the author that 'I have a story that will make you believe in God.' (p. x. Author's Note). Chapter I of the novel opens with the first person narration telling readers like

'My suffering left me sad and gloomy. Academic study and the steady, mindful practice of religion slowly brought me back to life. I have kept up what some people would consider my strange religious practices.' (p. 3. LOP)

The opening chapter has the grip on the whole novel. It is secretly telling us the story through the Pi Patel's words. There is the reference of Richard Parker too and his unceremonious parting while they landed on the Mexico' seashore.

The novel is divided into three parts and its first part talks about the Piscine Molitor Patel's spiritual upbringing and his family life. In this part we come to know about his inclination towards religions from childhood. It tells us how he was a Hindu by birth as born to the Hindu parents whose marriage was an intercaste love marriage. By birth he had every right to follow Hindu gods but his craving to reach a spiritual level with subtle knowledge lead him to follow the Christianity and Muslimism. With these three important religions with their order of appearance on the earth, they followed Pi Patel one strait after other, back to back. Pi's inability to choose single religion for practicing make him targeted by the spiritual leaders of these three religions and outcome of all these was Pi's banning by the leaders to come inside the temple and mosque, not by the god but by the followers. He started to visit the temple in the busy hours, took baptism and bought a prayer rug to pray. Pi believed that he wanted to love god no matter in what shape and form it is, and don't want to create any hindrance between him and the God. This shows his confidence in him which does not allowed anybody to discourage him or divert him from his faith and believes, this (anybody) belong his family too.

The first part also tells us that how lonely, gloomy and isolated Pi was because no other boy from the school wanted to befriend with him because of his name Piscine Molitor, given after the famous swimming pool of Paris by his uncle Francis Adirubasamy. He finds solace in animals and religion, apparently in the almighty god while coping with these problems. In the entire novel reader can see how Pi is telling us the instances that animals are having the human quality and he kept comparing the two worlds of animals and humans in the background of morality and violence while describing his father's zoo and its animals in Pondicherry.

In the novel Yann Martel uses history to show the Political upheavals of India which made Pi's father to leave India and settle in Canada. First part of the novel ends with the Pi and his family's departure from India. Second part begins with sinking of the ship drowning his parents and his only brother Ravi. Pi was thrown on the lifeboat by the ship's crew members but, unfortunately that lifeboat was occupied by four other animals namely, a zebra with a broken leg, a hyena, orange juice (a female orangutan) and a four-fifty pounds Bengal tiger with an odd name Richard Parker. The story takes an exciting step from here onward to prove that Pi Patel's journey was nothing but the conflict between belief and disbelief. Out of all the animals on the lifeboat ugly hyena killed zebra after that to the orangutan. When this hyena tried to kill Pi, Richard Parker appeared on the scene and kills the hyena. After this incident only two sole survivors left on the lifeboat, Pi and Richard Parker with the similarity of unusual names. Pi which means Piscine Moliter, a swimming pool with good capacity to hold the water and Richard Parker who actually is named Thirsty but due to the typical clerical mistakes named Richard Parker; both of them related directly or indirectly with the water and ultimately left into the huge, endless ocean to face their destiny. Pi tried to kill tiger but was unable so he tried to overcome his fear of tiger and try to control Richard Parker through his hunger.

Pi's suffering brought him to a stage when he felt devastated because of uncertainties, but his belief made him to recognize the power of that abstract source namely the God. On the verge of this they both witnessed the Iceland full of meerkats, giving us the clue that it is fantasy world of fiction. In the midst of this chaos Pi kept thinking of civilization he wanted to remain with while maintaining his sanity, faith and humanity. The second part ends with Pi's landing on the Mexican seashore where Pi lament for the unceremonious living of Richard Parker. The third part of the novel is having encounter between Pi and Japanese Insurance Agent. Pi narrates the original story of his survival but was not acceptable by the agents so he narrates the second story in which real animals are replaced with the human characters. The comparison between the two stories which Pi narrates before the Japanese insurance agents is making us believe that the novel is an allegorical tale which Yann Martel tells us and left us with an open-ending to have the freeplay of our thoughts. For one time reader thinks that it is because of Pi's belief in the almighty power he made it happened to survive on the lifeboat for 227 days (reciprocal to the mathematical value of Pi) along with the man-eater Bengal tiger.

Many instances are there to prove that it is a fantasy travel fiction namely the incident of seaweed Iceland, which was occupied by uncountable numbers of meerkats. Apart from this the

Iceland was not having any solid base in the form of land or mud. All we come to know that there was a floating Iceland and carnivorous trees, the water was sweet in the midst of the sea which is truly unbelievable and the same water turns to acid because of algae when the night approaches. Because of this all the meerkats on the Iceland went to trees for sleeping in the night. Apart from all these Pi's pantheistic belief and following of too many religions makes us to think that the novel is a postcolonial blending of realism and fantasy.

This unfilmable story of Pi Patel was directed by Ang Lee. It is said that the movie is the lively source which has the stimulating effect on the minds of the spectators. As the words speak for the author, camera speaks for the director. Ang Lee, an Asian Director directed the films like *The Wedding Banquet*, *Pushing Hands*, and *Eat Drink Man Woman* which explored the relationships and conflicts between tradition and modernity, Eastern and Western. In the movies like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Hulk* and *Brokeback Mountain* Ang Lee is showing about repressed, hidden emotions. Lee had won the Academy Award for the Best Director twice, first it was for *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and second for *Life of Pi* (2012). His films are insightful which touch the human heart and make his movies to cross the cultural and linguistic barriers to speak with audiences all over the world.

Ang Lee, when was receiving his Academy Award for Best Director for Life of Pi he said in his speech like this –

“Thank you, movie God! I really need to share this with all the three thousand, everybody worked with me in Life of Pi. I want to thank you for believing in the story and sharing this incredible journey with me. I like to thank Yann Martel for writing this incredible, inspiring book.” (Oscar Speech)

Ang Lee was raised up as a Christian and when he came in contact with Buddhism and Taoism his concepts of religion and God changed. From the first line of his speech we come to know that he has faith in God but in his interviews on different occasions he made it clear that he never believed in the God with a form or shape but he always been a believer in the God with abstract form. The same was with Yann Martel whose family shifted to Canada and he felt that that made him to follow the abstract form of the God. Pi in Life of Pi has the pantheistic belief and probably it is the writer who is speaking with readers and challenging their faiths by following

three main religions in the world. This faith helped Pi on the sea when he was away from society and organized religions. In the Directors Talk on HBO, Ang Lee said that *Life of Pi* is not the greatest book he ever had read, it is the element of it which just kept blogging him, something which he wanted to find out made him to accept the project of the *Life of Pi*.

Telling a story is an art, and telling it more effectively is a skill. Ang Lee is a story teller and he tells it through his movies. *Brokeback Mountain* is the best example for this. Every genre has its specific way of presenting. Directors as well as writers talk with their characters. In the journey of Pi Patel from literature to film Yann Martel told us the story through Pi Patel and Ang Lee while visualizing it, talked with the audience through Suraj Sharma. These both great creators put the main protagonist in the compass of creation. Ang Lee believes that 3D made it easy to present and represent which he only can imagine but unable to portray. Adaptations have certain limitation because readers are somehow felt attached with the text they read and cherished. While preparing a movie version of the same text, director have the solo responsibility to prepare for the readers of the text and audience who never-ever gone through the text. The reader's attachment with the characters from the novel must be shown through the proper face while it is on-screen. Ang Lee felt, Suraj Sharma, an unknown boy in the film industry was the better option as he got selected after being auditioned to three thousand boys from India. While shooting the film Lee completely relied on the character of Suraj Sharma and in one of his interview he actually said that he followed the protagonist Suraj Sharma and in the case of Suraj Sharma it is vice versa. Such belief is the place where the success of any art lies in the journey of creation.

While writing the screenplay for *Life of Pi*, David Magee who also adapted *Finding Neverland* did his homework well. He search many books for the spiritual journey of the humans and ultimately after reading *Moby Dick*, *Old Man and the Sea*, and *Noah's Ark*, he found the story of Job from the Old *Testament* more inspirational than any other work with water. And his screenplay too works with audience from all over the world and the readers of the original book awfully.

In the process of directing the film Ang Lee found that shipwreck story with water was not working properly with the small tank (but actually it is a huge wave tank ever created for a movie) his team had built in Taiwan; he felt frustrated and puzzled many a time. But, he kept the faith on his work because there was the crew of almost three thousand people working from India,

Canada, Taiwan and America after this movie. All these people's expectations were after Ang Lee. He had to be strong and maintain his sanity which he did successfully and for this he thanked the Movie God as well as Yann Martel while receiving the award for Best Director second time in his life. Yann Martel in an interview with Kindah Mardam Bey said about the *Life of Pi*'s film adaptation as follows-

“Movie is fantastic and making it crystal clear what is hard to imagine otherwise. For example layer of the life boat, look of the raft, sinking of the ship, the ferocity of tiger, the island, the meerkats all that comes to life in the movie. Movie won't necessarily be exploring the thematic religious stuff that's more writerly. So, each one is having its limitations and that's how I see them the best of companion pieces.” (www.youtube.com)

Martel further said that he was happy that the project was taken over by Ang Lee who is a versatile director and an extreme hard-worker. Martel as a writer focused on the Indian tone and dialogues of the characters and nothing else. He, in the beginning made it very clear that it is Ang Lee's movie not his novel so that the director have more space to create. Ang Lee too came to India for authentic data for the movie. He shared his experience and said that it was enjoyable and educational for him to come to India and shoot in Pondicherry and Munnar. He met here an oldest tiger trainer of about one-hundred and five years of age which was amazing for him.

Talking about Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) and 3D, *Life of Pi* because of this technology became more lively and effective. Use of this made the film as painting than just a photograph. 3D have a stimulating effect on the audience and it creates an illusion, a kind of realism which 2D cant. The things which are normal in 2D are overacted in 3D, so it becomes hard to do it in 3D, but we must say after watching the movie in 3D that Ang Lee's first experiment with 3D is quiet successful and water really worked best with the 3D along with CGI tiger.

Adaptation of any work of art leads to some changes. *Life of Pi* on-screen and off-screen is definitely different. The love-life of Pi is introduced and while Pi's teachers role in his teaching is definitely escaped in the movie. Movie touched directly to the core of the novel. But in the end all we can say that all the stories are telling something to us while avoiding directly saying it. If we are deep-thinkers then definitely we can reach the core of it. Both writer and director took four years to complete the work and the amalgam of the research is truly a rewarding thing for them. The film is talking about animals and human beings as well as religion. In all these manners it is a

post-colonial fiction about religion and redemption, challenging the religious biasness of the people who made the compartment in the house of God. Pi travel through all these compartments and so does the writer, director, reader and audience. After this entire shipwreck and survival thing Pi never let his faith down and kept it increasing by all means.

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