



Reimagining Human-Animal Narrative: A Posthumanist Reading Of Yann Martel's *Life Of Pi*

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a posthumanist critique of Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi*. Drawing on posthumanist theory, the paper examines the novel's representations of nonhuman animals, the human-animal relationship, and the power of storytelling. The paper argues that *Life of Pi* offers a complex and nuanced portrayal of the relationship between humans and animals, challenging conventional views of hierarchy and domination. At the same time, the novel highlights the potential for storytelling to shape our perceptions of reality, to create empathy and understanding, and to connect us with each other and with the world around us. Through its exploration of the interdependence of all creatures, the novel offers a compelling case for the importance of cultivating compassion and recognizing the agency of nonhuman animals. The paper draws on a theoretical framework that combines posthumanist theory with critical animal studies and narrative theory. By analysing the novel through this lens, the paper offers a unique perspective on the ways in which narrative can be used to challenge dominant discourses and create new forms of knowledge and understanding. Ultimately, the paper argues that *Life of Pi* offers a powerful example of the transformative potential of storytelling, and highlights the urgent need for new narratives that can help us to rethink human-animal relationship beyond anthropocentric bias.

Keywords: Agency, Animals, Interdependence, Posthumanism, Storytelling.

Introduction

Life of Pi, the critically acclaimed novel by Yann Martel, tells the story of a young Indian boy named Piscine Molitor Patel, nicknamed Pi who is stranded on a lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean with a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker after a shipwreck. The novel is a powerful exploration of human nature, faith, and the struggle to survive in the face of adversity. However, *Life of Pi* can also be read as a critique of traditional notions of human exceptionalism, which asserts that humans are fundamentally different from and superior to other animals, thereby being the only carriers of agency. Through a posthumanist lens, *Life of Pi* challenges these notions and raises important questions about the relationship between humans and nonhuman animals. Posthumanism is a critical theory that challenges anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism by questioning the fundamental distinctions between humans and other animals. In *Life of Pi*, nonhuman animal characters such as Richard Parker and other animals encountered by Pi on his journey play a significant role in deconstructing traditional anthropocentric views of nature and animals. Pi Patel's journey challenges the conventional notion that humans are fundamentally emotional creatures, while wild animals like tigers are solely driven by survival instincts. In Martel's novel, this stereotype is shattered as the main character, Pi, discovers a profound companionship with the Bengal tiger, Richard Parker. Their relationship proves to be a testament to the intricate interdependence that can exist between humans and animals.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this paper is critical posthumanism, a philosophical and cultural movement that challenges traditional views of human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism, emphasizing the interdependence of humans, non-human animals, and technology. Posthumanism "is based on the realization that the human species has been placed in a hierarchical scale and has been granted an ontological privilege in the large majority of the historical accounts on the human." (Ferrando, 2019, p.54) Posthumanism recognizes that humans are not the only actors in the world and that other entities such as animals, plants, and even non-living objects can have agency and impact the world in significant ways. "Prejudice against other animals arises from socially promulgated beliefs that reflect a speciesist ideology..." (Nibert, 2013, p.275)

It highlights the need to move beyond anthropocentrism and to consider the ethical and moral implications of our actions towards nonhuman entities. The posthumanist approach emphasizes the complex and dynamic relationship between humans and nonhuman entities, and it challenges the conventional binary distinctions between nature and culture, subject and object, and self and other. Posthumanist scholars emphasize the importance of recognizing and valuing nonhuman entities as subjects in their own right, with their own agency and significance.

Movements for animal rights are not irrational denials of human uniqueness; they are a clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture. Biology and evolutionary theory over the last two centuries have simultaneously produced modern organisms as objects of knowledge and reduced the line between humans and animals to a faint trace re-etched in ideological struggle or professional disputes between life and social science. Within this framework, teaching modern Christian creationism should be fought as a form of child abuse. (Haraway, 1991, p.152)

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in posthumanist perspectives on animal ethics, which seek to recognize the agency and subjectivity of non-human animals, and to question the hierarchical and exploitative relationships between humans and other species. This challenges traditional notions of animal essence and reinforces the need for more flexible and responsive approaches to animal welfare and protection. Within the theoretical framework of posthumanist animal ethics is the idea of interspecies solidarity, which emphasizes the potential for solidarity and collaboration across species boundaries, as Lynda Birke argues "It is extremely important that we recognize the involvement of nonhumans in the creation of cultures (human or otherwise), that we understand that they are not only 'good to think with,' but are also crucially partners in the making of our world." (2011, p. xix) According to this view, humans and non-human animals share common interests and struggles, such as the fight against environmental destruction and exploitation, and should work together to achieve shared goals. Rosi Braidotti in her book *The Posthuman* discusses a process she calls Becoming-Animal in order to challenge the anthropocentric notions. The focus of her discussion lies in the discursive practices that enable *Anthropos* to position itself as distinct and superior to the rest of the animal kingdom. To illustrate this, she employs Louis Borges' satirical taxonomy, which classifies animals into three groups: those we watch television with, those we consume, and those we fear. Braidotti effectively employs these categories to illustrate how our interaction with nonhuman animals remains confined within traditional paradigms: "an Oedipalized connection (you and me together on the same sofa); an instrumental one (thou shalt be consumed eventually); and a fantastical one (exotic, extinct infotainment objects of titillation)" (2013, p.68). Braidotti observes that the Oedipal relationship between humans and nonhuman animals is inherently imbalanced, founded on the anthropocentric presumption that these other beings primarily exist in relation to humans. This is most evident in our relationships with our pets, and permeates our language. Braidotti notes that animals have long been reduced to metaphorical representations of human virtues. To dismantle this forceful imposition of human characteristics onto nonhuman animals, Braidotti asserts the necessity for a "system of representation that matches the complexity of contemporary non-human animals and their proximity to humans" (2013, p.70). Nonhuman animals must no longer serve as symbols reinforcing human centrality, but should instead be approached in a "neo-literal mode" as entities independent of human constructs. This framework challenges the idea of humans as separate and superior beings, and encourages a more egalitarian and cooperative approach to human-animal relations. By emphasizing the interdependence and fluidity of human and non-human subjectivity, questioning the limitations of traditional animal rights discourse, and encouraging collaboration and solidarity across species boundaries, posthumanism offers a powerful and transformative approach to animal advocacy and ethics.

In addition to posthumanism, this paper will also comment on the storytelling and narrative, highlighting the power of storytelling to shape our perceptions of reality, to create empathy and understanding, and to connect us with each other and with the world around us. The paper will explore the complex relationship between storytelling and truth, and the potential of narrative to both illuminate and obscure reality.

The Power of Storytelling

Life of Pi is part of a longstanding tradition of survival stories, which recount the adventures of sailors who set out in search of fortune in distant lands, only to end up stranded, much like Robinson Crusoe, a fictional character, inspired by the real-life tale of Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor who was shipwrecked in 1704 and spent over four years alone on the island of Juan Fernandez before being rescued. As discussed earlier,

Posthumanism's most fundamental task is to dethrone humanist tendency of anthropocentrism and fictional stories and narratives play a crucial part in it. Etymologically, fiction implies the creation of an imagined reality that transcends the tangible and comprehensible world. By its very nature, it points toward a reality rooted in being-with and coexisting with the unfamiliar other. Thus, the act of constructing fictional worlds and sustaining a universe of stories holds the potential to be profoundly de-subjectivating and disanthropocentric. While fictional characters are not explicitly labeled as emotionless machines, it is common for someone to remind another who has a strong emotional reaction to a character that they are "just" fictional. Despite this, the power of imagination is underscored by J.M. Coetzee's character Elizabeth Costello in his metafictional novel *The Lives of Animals*: "If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life" (p.35). To think one's way into the existence of another being is an essential step in practicing empathy. *Life of Pi* is a story about stories, highlighting the power of storytelling to shape our perceptions of reality, to create meaning, and to connect us with each other and with the world around us. Through Pi's own storytelling and the stories, he encounters throughout his journey, the novel explores the complex ways in which narrative can both illuminate and obscure truth, and how it can be used to create empathy, understanding, and compassion. As Jerome Bruner notes "Narrative is not only a way of organizing information, but also a way of creating meaning." (1990, p.11) One of the most powerful aspects of *Life of Pi* is its emphasis on the role of storytelling in shaping our perceptions of reality. The novel begins with an assertion in author's note that "I have a story that will make you believe in God" (Martel 2001, p. x). Pi's story is a testament to the power of narrative to create meaning, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges.

Donna Haraway places stories above ideologies "Stories are much bigger than ideologies. In that is our hope." (2003, p.17) She argues that, "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories." (2016, p.12) Through his storytelling, Pi creates a world that is both fantastical and deeply resonant, inviting readers to question their own assumptions about what is possible and what is real. At the same time, *Life of Pi* also suggests that storytelling can be used to obscure truth, particularly in situations where the stakes are high. As Pi notes in his interview with the Japanese officials, "I know what you want. You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know." (Martel 2001, p. 294). It is evident that Pi becomes increasingly agitated by the Japanese men's disbelief in his original narrative. Despite his efforts to convince them, they demand to know the real story of his survival. This prompts Pi to tell a second, animal-free version of his journey, as he strives to demonstrate the truth of his incredible experience. Helen Reiss notes that "literary fiction teaches you that not everyone thinks the way you do" (2018, p.133). Recognizing that not everyone thinks alike requires a willingness to suspend belief to some degree, and a recurring theme throughout the novel is the decentring of believability. In this sense, the novel highlights the complex relationship between storytelling and truth, suggesting that narrative can be both a powerful tool for understanding and a potential barrier to knowledge. The novel also explores the power of storytelling to create empathy and understanding. Through Pi's own experiences and the stories he encounters throughout his journey, the novel invites readers to see the world from multiple perspectives, and to cultivate compassion for others especially animals which Japanese officials find hard to digest as Pi confronts them by saying "You want a story without animals." (p.294) Pi's encounters with the hyena and the French castaway challenge readers to question their assumptions about who is deserving of empathy and who is not, and to recognize the interconnectedness of all beings. While empathy specialist Helen Reiss describes empathy as a scenario "when people understand the plight of others and respond appropriately even if they do not themselves feel the exact same emotion but are able to access an experience cognitively through imagination" (p.11), an empathy that is not exclusive to single species must also make a genuine effort to move beyond anthropocentric tendencies and embrace empathy, even in the face of the uncertainties and unfamiliarity that often arise when encountering a nonhuman entity. The narrative and metaphorical power of the novel compel readers to consider the interdependence of all creatures, and to question conventional views of hierarchy and domination. Finally, *Life of Pi* suggests that storytelling can be a powerful tool for connecting us with each other and with the world around us. Pi's story is one that inspires and moves readers, inviting them to reflect on their own lives and to find meaning in their experiences. As Pi, whose source of fear turned into his source of perseverance, says about his experience, "It is the irony of this story that the one who scared me witless to start with was the very same who brought me peace, purpose, I dare say even wholeness." (p. 203) Also, Pi makes the Japanese official realise towards the end of the novel, "the story with animals is the better story" (p. 315). In this sense, the novel highlights the importance of sharing stories as a means of building community and finding meaning in our lives.

The Human-Animal Relationship

The intricacies and complexities of the human-animal relationship have been a topic of great debate and discussion throughout history. The traditional belief that humans are superior and distinct from other animals has been challenged in recent times by posthumanist perspectives that seek to emphasize the interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings. In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway critiques Gilles

Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "becoming," arguing that it is too dichotomous and centered on the human. In contrast, she advocates for the idea of "becoming with," which emphasizes the mutual symbolic transformation of both participants. Haraway contends that "becoming with" enables them to become more "worldly." (p.3). The relationship between the human and the animal is one of necessary reciprocity, where the animal is not simply a tool for the human's use but an equal in the relationship. As Rosi Braidotti notes, posthuman scholarship "rests on a positive relationship to the diversity of Zoe – non-human life – in a non-hierarchical manner, recognising the respective degrees of intelligence, ability and creativity of all organisms." (2019, p. 170) The novel's nonhuman animal characters, particularly Richard Parker, play a significant role in deconstructing traditional anthropocentric views of nature and animals. Richard Parker's relationship with Pi is a dynamic and constantly evolving one, in which both parties are transformed by their interactions with each other. The tiger Richard Parker operates as a powerful site for thinking the complexities of the relationship between the human and the animal. Through Pi's relationship with Richard Parker, the novel blurs the boundaries between human and animal, and suggests that these categories are not as fixed as traditional anthropocentric views would suggest. *Life of Pi* explores these themes in great depth and complexity in the novel. The novel begins with Pi's family owning a zoo, which serves as a backdrop for Pi's early interactions with nonhuman animals. The apprehension he harboured towards the tiger stemmed from a formative childhood experience at Pondicherry Zoo, shaped by his father's anthropocentric approach. He was led to the vicinity of a tiger that had been intentionally deprived of food for three days. There, he was made to witness the carnivorous frenzy as the hungry beast consumed a goat hurled into its cage. This anthropocentric gesture aimed to instill the belief that cruelty was an innate trait in tigers, and by extension, in animals overall. The fact that the tiger was deliberately made to starve is conveniently forgotten. These interactions establish Pi's early interest and curiosity in nonhuman animals, which later become crucial to his survival on a stranded boat.

Richard Parker, as a Bengal tiger, is a powerful symbol of the wildness and unpredictability of nature. However, he is also a complex character with his own desires, motivations, and agency. As Donna Haraway notes, "species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect" (2008, p. 19). Further she states "To knot companion and species together in encounter, in regard and respect, is to enter the world of becoming with, where who and what are is precisely what is at stake" (p.19). In a scene where Richard Parker is aboard the lifeboat, Pi realizes the value of understanding Richard Parker's forms of communication as he notes his "cautionary signals designed to avoid a showdown" (p.229). In recognizing the instances where Richard Parker might be feeling threatened by Pi, he explains that "[e]ventually I learned to read the signals he was sending me. I found that with his ears, his eyes, his whiskers, his teeth, his tail and his throat, he spoke a simple, forcefully punctuated language that told me what his next move might be" (p.229). However, while one might argue that animals lack language and that their sounds are merely unstructured utterances, isn't it also anthropocentric to assume that animal communication lacks structure? Louis Althusser's concept of "interpellation" explains how individuals are shaped by ideology into specific subject. In the context of our narratives about animals, we similarly construct their identities and assign them to our concepts of nature and culture, with significant implications for their well-being and survival. Animals may not possess symbolic or easily recognizable phonological speech, yet they do have utterances and a "language with flesh." (Barthes, p.67). Through the shared struggle of survival on a stranded life boat, Pi comes to realize that the relationship between humans and animals is one of interdependence and mutual transformation. At first, Pi is terrified of Richard Parker and sees him as a threat to his survival. Initially, Pi attempts to assert dominance over the tiger, establishing territories on the lifeboat. However, as their journey unfolds, a transformation occurs. Pi realizes that for both of them to survive, he must not only provide for himself but also ensure Richard Parker's sustenance. He actively engages in fishing and devises ways to meet the tiger's needs. This reciprocity transforms their dynamic from one of mere survival to a fragile, symbiotic partnership. This shift highlights the novel's underlying message that our connection with animals can be characterized by mutual dependence and ethical consideration rather than sheer exploitation. Their interactions with each other lead to transformative experiences for both parties. From a posthumanist perspective, Pi's character, who begins to see the tiger as more than just a predator by living aside animals challenges the traditional anthropocentric view of human essentialism. A similar shift in the character of Richard Parker is also conspicuous as his attitude shifts with his interaction with Pi. At the beginning of their journey, Richard Parker is portrayed as a ferocious and dangerous animal who poses a constant threat to Pi's survival. However, as time passes, Richard Parker develops a kind of companionship with Pi. Richard Parker's shift in character is gradual but significant. He starts to show signs of loyalty and even protectiveness towards Pi. For example, when they are attacked by another tiger on a floating island, Richard Parker fights the other tiger to protect Pi. Both Pi and Richard Parker become companions in the sense Donna Haraway points out, "We are training each other in acts of communication we barely understand. We are, constitutively, companion species." (2003, p.2) It is also evident in Pi's acknowledgement "[i]f I survived my apprenticeship as a high seas animal trainer, it was because Richard Parker did not really want to attack me" (p.229). Pi thus acknowledges Richard Parker's capacity for agency, rather than flattering his own abilities in animal taming. Further an interesting look at the name 'Richard Parker' suggests an inter-textual reference to Edgar Allan Poe's novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. In both narratives, a shipwreck leads to a small group of survivors in a lifeboat, with a crew member named Richard Parker. In Poe's story, desperation

leads to cannibalism, resulting in Parker's tragic fate, who is eaten by his co-sailors for their survival. This inter-textual link serves as a thought-provoking exploration of human and animal survival instincts in dire circumstances. In *Life of Pi*, Richard Parker's actions, while driven by necessity, mirror the desperation of Poe's character, offering a poignant commentary on the lengths to which individuals may go to ensure their own survival and the human survival instincts are not very distinct from animals.

However, the novel also grapples with the ethical dilemmas of survival in extreme circumstances. Pi is confronted with the choice of sacrificing his own values to ensure his survival, or adhering to his principles even in the face of dire adversity. This internal struggle is mirrored in his relationship with Richard Parker. Pi's sense of responsibility towards the tiger grows, demonstrating that their coexistence is not merely a matter of convenience but an ethical obligation born out of their shared struggle for survival. "[i]t was not a question of him or me, but of him and me" (p.181). Pi's interactions with other nonhuman animals, such as the flying fish and the hyena, further challenge traditional views of humans as indifferent to the suffering of other creatures. While it's typical for humans to form strong bonds with domesticated pets (which Braidotti calls an oedipal relationship), it's a rarer occurrence for a civilized human to discover profound companionship and emotional fulfilment through a wild animal. This is evident as in one of Pi's most despairing moments, he exclaims to Richard Parker, "I love you! ... truly I do. I love you, Richard Parker, don't give up. I'll get you to land, I promise." (p. 220) This poignant moment serves as a genuine testament to the depth of Pi's affection and commitment towards the animal, surpassing mere concern for his own survival. In *Life of Pi*, Pi's interactions with nonhuman animals also bring out his rooted sense of sympathy and guilt. For example, when Pi is forced to kill a fish for food, he acknowledges the fish's agency and the importance of its life: "I wept heartily over this poor little deceased soul. It was the first sentient being I had ever killed. I was now a killer. I was now as guilty as Cain. I was sixteen years old, a harmless boy, bookish and religious, and now I had blood on my hands. It's a terrible burden to carry. All sentient life is sacred." (p.185) Pi's compassion is also evident, as he mourns the death of the hyena despite its previous attempts to attack him.

Animals in *Life of Pi* also act as a site that makes Pi reflect on the ethical and moral complexities and thereby inform the reasoning and emotions of Pi as evidenced by Pi's reasoning over his contradictory feelings on killing of the dorado:

You may be astonished that in such a short period of time I could go from weeping over the muffled killing of a flying fish to gleefully bludgeoning to death a dorado. I could explain it by arguing that profiting from a pitiful flying fish's navigational mistake made me shy and sorrowful, while the excitement of actively capturing a great dorado made me sanguinary and self-assured. But in point of fact the explanation lies elsewhere. It is simple and brutal: a person can get used to anything, even to killing. (p.185)

Pi recognizes that the right to life is not exclusive to humans and acknowledges that an animal has the power to emotionally impact your life. He carries a lifelong sorrow over not receiving a proper goodbye from Richard Parker. When they reach Mexico and Richard Parker leaps out of the lifeboat, Pi says he was "certain he would turn [his] way" (p.316). However, Pi reflects, "[h]e did nothing of the sort. He only looked fixedly into the jungle. Then Richard Parker, companion of my torment, awful, fierce thing that kept me alive, moved forward and disappeared forever from my life" (p.316). Pi is very complex figure who shows his capacity for empathy and his connectedness to non-human entities but at the same time, his ability to adapt and survive in a challenging environment reveals his resilience and agency as an individual. Pi's character can also be seen as a product of his environment and experiences, shaped by the natural world thereby highlighting the complex interrelationships that exist between them.

Conclusion

Life of Pi delves into posthumanist themes, prompting reflection on human-animal relationships and defying conventional notions about our place in the natural world. It critiques anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism, emphasizing the shared vulnerabilities and intelligence of all beings. Pi's bond with Richard Parker blurs the lines between human and animal, challenging our understanding of existence. However, the novel acknowledges the entrenched nature of anthropocentrism, evident in the Japanese officials' rejection of Pi's story. It also underscores the dual nature of storytelling - a tool for connection and understanding, but one that can also distort truth. Ultimately, the novel advocates for empathy, compassion, and ethical connections with both nature and fellow humans. *Life of Pi* highlights the transformative power of storytelling in building community and finding purpose, making it a significant contribution to discussions on ethics, culture, and the environment. In this sense, the novel invites us to recognize the importance of sharing stories as a means of connecting with each other and with the world around us. By challenging readers to rethink their assumptions about animals, nature, and our place in the world, the novel invites us to cultivate a more ethical and compassionate relationship with the natural world and with each other. As such, it is a vital contribution to the ongoing conversation about the intersection of ethics, culture, and the environment.

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