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Suspension of Disbelief: Critiquing the stories of the “Life of PI”

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Krishna Ni Bhe Gha-Ni, Baroo !
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Darkness coming around,
And everybody fight with the brother
Everybody wants control,
Don't hesitate to kill one-another
So come back as Jesus
Come back and save the world
Bless all the future of every boy and girl
Come back as Rama,
Forgive us for what we've done
Come back as Allah,
Come back as anyone
Religion is the reason,
The world is breaking up into pieces
Colour of the people,
Keeps us locked in hate please release us
So Come down and help us,
Save all the little ones
They need a teacher,
And you are the only one
We can't rely on,
To build a better world
A world that's for children,
A world that's for everyone

- *Colonial Cousins*

मुनिगन निकट बिहग मृग जाही | बाधक बधिक बिलोकि पराही ||
हित अनहित पसु पछिउ जाना | मानस तनु गन ग्यान निधाना ||

(Even beasts and birds can distinguish between a friend and a foe, to say nothing of the human body, which is a storehouse of virtue and knowledge.

Birds and bees draw close to hermits, while they run away at the very site of a hunter who torments them.)

- (Ramcharita Manas, Ayodhyakand 264, III)

फुलहि फरहि सदा तरु कानन | रहहि एक संग गज पंचानन ||
खग मृग सहज बयरु बिसराई | सबन्धि परस्पर प्रीति बढाई ||

(Trees in the forest blossomed and bore fruit throughout the year; the elephant and the lion lived together as friends, Nay birds and beasts of every description and forgotten their natural animosities and developed friendly relations with one another.)

(Ramcharita Manas, Uttarkand.23, i- ii)

अहिंसा प्रतिष्ठायां तत्सन्निधौ वैर त्यागः।

(All feeling of vengeance vanishes in the presence of a person who has practiced non-violence perfectly.)

(Patanjal Yogsutra, --sutra.35)

The lyric, “Krishanane beganee baro” the verse lines from Ramcharita Manas, and the lines from Patanjali Yogsutra all these and many more uncited instances form the whole body of Indian knowledge texts indicates the possibilities of co-existence of all living creatures be it carnivorous or herbivorous. The novel *Life of Pi* evokes the atmosphere of the former `Yugas` where saints and `rishis` lived in the company of wild animals, reminding us of Gandhi's dream of Ramrajya` where not only the hermits but the common men too lived harmoniously and fearlessly with the wild animals.

Life of Pi keeps the conversation going', writes Arnab Ray on Sunday, Dec 16- 2012. The statement led me to think that if this be true than what are those aspects that have the potential to keep the conversation regarding the 'Life of Pi' going. The novel has been perceived as an adult adventure story full of fantasy, using animal lore for its enchanting effect foregrounded on the dichotomy of personal faith and universal religiosity and deeply high on Indian spirituality, all set on Indian and Pacific ocean with a clear indication to the readers and viewers to suspend any disbelief if at all arising, since it is a Yann Martel story adapted into a film by Ang Lee. The writer wands his magical whip of narration the tour-de-force of doubt and faith, imagination and realism, scientific exactitude to fictitious fact which creates two stories for the officials which have come to investigate the ship's sinking, ultimately preferring the story with a tiger to the one without it. The present paper aims at studying the novel and its film adaption in the light of intertextuality. While comparing the novel and the film, it shall explore the multiple stories told and retold by the narrator, reminding one of Indian 'rishis' taming the tigers and Blake's "Tiger Tiger Burning Bright", creating a plethora of meaning, which in turn is the actual potential of the work that keeps the conversation going without the doubt of disbelief as to can one survive for 227 days on ocean with a tiger?

The novel and the film have received applause and admiration at the same time, raised endless number of questions and invited severe criticism throughout the world. The 2002 Booker prize

winning novel, *Life-of-Pi* becomes a 'touch of frivolous whimsy' in the eyes of Jason Overd of (*Far Eastern Economic Review* Nov 2002).

The Penguin edition of the novel runs into 319 pages and Ang Lee's film adaptation runs for 127 minutes casting Suraj Sharma, a non-actor recruited at open auditions as Piscine Molitor Patel. Yann Martel's earlier two novels did not make the same hit as is done by *Life-of-Pi*. On the other hand this film for Ang Lee is his 12th one and he is an acclaimed director with vast experience and expertise, named by Ryan Gilbey as 'the eclectic's eclectic, whose journey as a director has ranged freely between English period romance (sense and sensibility) and Chinese wartime espionage (lust, caution), martial arts Swash (crouching Tiger, hidden Dragon) and gay melodrama (*Brokeback Mountain*) (Ryan Gilbey, *New Statesman*: 2012).

The story within the story technique creates interest and suspense at the very outset since the main story is a web of stories each leading to either a reference to other text or throwing light on the tone and setting of the novel on which lies its success. The richness of the novel lies on the narrator's ability to use dexterously the 'intertextuality' the concept coined by Julia Kristeva. The novelist happens to meet Mr. erstwhile Dirubasamy, in Pondicherry, the French India who offers to tell him a story that will make him believe in God. Robbie Collin comments that: "Pi Patel can tell a story that makes you believe in God, but Ang Lee has gone one better: he has made a film that restores your faith in cinema." (Robbie Collin)

The novel and the film adopt the flashback technique to unfold the story of *Life of Pi*. Pi tells his story and thus begins the tour-de-force of the readers and spectators. The protagonist narrator, Piscine Molitor Patel, named after a Parisian swimming pool with aquatic excellence, is an Indian boy from Pondicherry, who explores issues of spirituality and practicality from an early age. Ironically enough, in his childhood, during a conversation with his biology teacher he makes a statement that would leave everyone thinking.

"Religion will save us", I said. Since when I could remember, religion had been very close to my heart. "Religion?" Mr. Kumar grinned broadly. "I don't believe in religion. Religion is darkness". (LOP, 2001: 27)

Pi who abbreviates his name for the sake of escaping the shame of being called Pissing by the fellow mates at school cutely adopts Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, a global trinity, a universal; a universal model of faith to solve the problems of personal fanatical religiosity. Pi is a Greek mathematical irrational number used to solve the rational equations.

The novel and the film oscillate between the rational and the irrational, spiritual and the physical, real and unreal, simplifying at the same time complicating the actual issue of storytelling as the author himself writes in the note; That`s what fiction is about, isn`t it, the selective transforming of reality? The twisting of it to bring out its essence? (VIII) And surely he executes his notion regarding fiction in Life-of Pi bringing such a twist towards the end, a mild kinklike to drive home the thought warmly, wisely and wonderfully that life is a story. You can choose your story and the story with illusory layers of imagination and creativity is always better. Pi survives on the South Pacific ocean for long 227 days, as the sole survivor of the Tsimtsum, the ship carrying his family and his father`s zoo animals to Canada from India. The logical convincing reasons for the ship`s sinking were not available but the shipwrecked Pi finds himself stranded on a life boat in the company of fearful symmetrical adult Bengal tiger weighing only 205 kgs. The tiger Richard Parker, begets his name from that of the hunter`s due to an administrative error. Parker was also the name of a victim in a notorious case of cannibalism at sea in the year 1884, and a sailor in Edgar Allan Poe`s Arthur Poe`s (1838) who shared the same fate. Pi survives because of the tiger and for the tiger. Relying on nothing but his wits and amusingly frank survival guidebook, he decides to tame the tiger and find a way to collect water and catch fish. The tone of the novel is smoothly set in the beginning itself when Pi says;

"My life is like a memento mori painting from European art; there is always a grinning skull at my side to remind me of the folly of human ambition, I mock this skull". I look at it and I say, "You`ve got the wrong fellow. You may not believe in life but I don`t believe in death. Move on!"(LoP 5)

At the very outset of the novel and the film the young Pi Patel emerges as a curious boy baffled with numerous questions regarding the existence of God, nature of human existence and human beings` relationship with the animal world and environment. Pi`s assertion in the above choice to challenge death in his unique way has an unusual association with Man`s Search For Meaning(1964) In this book Viktor Frankl chronicles his experiences as a concentration camp inmate and on the ocean for 227 days with the tiger only because he chose to do so. Frankl believed that (prisoner`s) psychological reactions are not solely the result of the conditions of his life, but also from the freedom of choice he always has even in severe suffering. The inner hold a prisoner has on his spiritual self relies on having a hope in future, and that once a prisoner

loses that hope, he is doomed. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/man's_search_for_meaning) What is true for prisoner is true Pi too, Pi's inner being is marked with high spiritual quotient, full of hope and faith in himself and life, his desire to reunite with his family, kept him going, continuing life. Surprisingly this feeling of belonging has been analogously described by the narrator as well as Viktor, 'Frankl offered the thought that for everyone in a dire condition there is someone looking down, a friend, family member, or even God, who would expect not to be disappointed'

The narrator observes:

“With the very first rays of light it came alive in me: hope. As things emerged in outline and filled with colour, hope increased until it was like a song in my heart. Oh, what it was to bask in it! Things would work out yet. The worst was over. I had survived the night. Today I would be rescued. To think that, to string those words together in my mind, was itself a source of hope. Hope fed on hope... The day was clear... I imagined Ravi would greet me first and with a tease... Father would be unshaven and dishvelled, Mother would look to the sky and take me in her arms. I went through a dozen versions of what it was going to be like on the rescue ship, variations on the theme of sweet reunion.” (LoP, 119-120)

It is striking coincidence that Pi who gave himself the meaning of a Greek irrational figure from the name of a swimming pool is constantly though unaware the notion of logotherapy which is created with the Greek word-“LOGOS”-(meaning). It would not be out of place and irrelevant to mention the basic principles of logotherapy and the steps through which one discovers meaning in life, which we find being used by the protagonist “Pi” in the film and the novel.

The following are the tenets that represent the basic principles of the logotherapy.

- 1) Life has a meaning under all the circumstances even the most miserable ones.
- 2) Our main motivation for living is our will to find meaning in life.
- 3) We have freedom to find meaning in what we do, and what we experience, or at least in the stand we take when faced with the situation of unchangeable suffering (*Maria Marshal Edward Marshal 2012*).

According to Frankl, we can discover the meaning to life in three different ways:

- i) By creating a work or doing a deed
- ii) By experiencing something or encountering someone
- iii) By the attitude that we take towards unavoidable suffering “and that” everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances (Victor Frankl, 1964)

Pi’s life is visibly lead by the basic principle of logotherapy and it is wonder to know that he has actualized all the three ways of discovering meanings in life. Pi is active in action and inaction and that is how he has created the work of an international repute. He encounters questions that were spiritual, metaphysical, religious, and mystical and searched for the answers constantly. To cite just one incident he happens to ask the dancing girl the meaning of one of the ‘Mudras’ of the classical dance that he has failed to understand, the answer to which he gets when he reaches onto an island full of meerkats and carnivorous trees. The stand that Pi takes in different stages of life is an amalgamation of his father’s reason and mother’s religious belief mixed with his own way of looking and feeling the whole universe through his spiritual consciousness. And therefore when his brother teases him by asking: “So Swami Jesus, will you on the Hajj this year?” There is an affirmative answer springing from the enlightened soul of the 21st century. If Jesus be seated in the love temple of Rajkot district in the Dhyana mudra of Gautam Buddha and a priest wearing ‘dhoti’ (traditional attire of the Hindu priest), does the ‘Aarti’ of Jesus why can’t swami Jesus not go on a Hajj? If everything can go global why not religion?

The story of the novel is extremely graphic and picturesque and the film with all its spectacular scenes is made out of a compact story. The seascapes and the horizons, the people and places, ocean and island painted through the words of Mortel get digital reality when project through Ang Lee’s lens. The rich imagery created by the novelist is further enriched by Lee with a commitment to beautify it in an overwhelming way. When it comes to watching the film, we grasp at the shining eyes and flaring nostrils of the tiger, the horrendous waves of the mighty storm, a squadron of flying fish, a humpbacked whale, a school of dolphins, a host of meerkats and not to take our eyes of the screen on which for majority of the time we have before us the ocean, the tiger and Pi Patel. The animal and the ocean, and sometimes even Pi himself, are wholly digital creations creating the effect of more than real in magnificent way. Peter Bradshaw in his review of the film writes:

“The digitally created tiger is incredible, or rather very credible and that unreal tiger really is mind-blowing, real looking. How did they do that? Well I suspended m disbelief in good faith- and my skepticism about ‘image-realism’ also and Ang Lee’s brilliant digital work made that easy.” (Peter Bradshaw, 2012)

The film begins with the adult Pi promising that he has a tale that will make anyone believe in God. It ends with a twist-well more of a mild kink-that leaves the impression of an ‘exasperating ending founded on some fatous assumptions’ (*Peter Broadshaw,2012*) yet it can also be considered as an open ended text with possibility of multiple interpretations inviting the readers to watch the film and spectators to read the novel.

Philip French writes in his review on the film that:

“The 227 days at sea are at a test of physique, mental adaptation and faith and Suraj Sharma makes Pi’s exceptional journey as convincing as his nautical one’.(*The observer, Sunday Times 23 Dec 2012*)

To conclude is very difficult since the novel is spread on an epic scale with an extended metaphor and allegorical implication of two parallel journeys that Pi undertakes, the spiritual one within and the physical one without. Pi’s pillar has a concrete foundation of philosophy and psychology. Hence to come to a closure, Pi is a modern enlightened being born in the land of Lord Buddha, Mahavir, Aurobindo, Gandhi, Raman Maharshi and many more rishis and saints who have kept the legacy of Indian spiritualism alive. Like Gandhi he believes in understanding and imbibing the good from all the religions. Like Buddha and Mahavir he has love and compassion for all creatures. He is a perennial seeker in search of self, striving to decipher meaning in God’s creation and thereby adding meaning to his own existence. So the tour-de-force begins in Pondicherry, the seat of Shri Aurobindo and ends in Mexico via Pacific, leaving no scope for disbelief because he believed in himself.

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