Between Page and Screen: Representing Animals in *Life of Pi*

Suwarna Suryavanshi, Anima P., Dinesh Kumar Nair
ORCID https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2795-5349

Corresponding Author: Suwarna Suryavanshi, Assistant Professor, Department of Science and Humanities, K. J. Somaiya College of Engineering, Vidyavihar East, Mumbai, suwarna.s@somaiya.edu
Co-author: Anima P., Assistant Professor in the Department of Science and Humanities at K. J. Somaiya College of Engineering, Vidyavihar East, Mumbai, animap@somaiya.edu
Co-author: Dinesh Kumar Nair, Professor and Head, Department of English at V. G. Vaze College, Mulund, Mumbai, dineshnair98704@gmail.com

Abstract

Aim: *This paper examines the problematic representation of animals in Yann Martel's novel Life of Pi and Ang Lee's film adaptation. It seeks to analyze how inter-semiotic translation from text to film affects the agency, authenticity, and subjectivity of nonhuman characters while addressing broader questions of anthropocentrism and speciesism.*
Methodology and Approaches: *The study employs comparative textual and cinematic analysis to highlight the representational gaps between the novel and its adaptation.*
Outcome: *The analysis reveals that while Martel's novel provides animals with discursive depth through descriptive language and philosophical reflection, Ang Lee's adaptation relies heavily on CGI and cinematic spectacle to construct believable yet otherworldly portrayals. The film tends to foreground Pi's emotional journey, often reducing the emphasis on animal suffering and ethical dilemmas present in the novel. Nonetheless, Lee's cinematic techniques expand visual possibilities and promote a new form of animal co-existence on screen.*
Conclusion and Suggestions: *The study concludes that both novel and film, despite their medium-specific limitations, contribute significantly to promoting animal personhood and rights. Future adaptation practices should aim for a more balanced representation of human and nonhuman stakeholders by integrating ethical considerations with technological innovations.*

A desire to retell the story, adapting it into a new genre is an age-old practice. Among all types of adaptations, film adaptation has gained more popularity over the years as it is equipped with the ability to reproduce the written literature on the screen with a visually captivating series of images and auditory effects. Film adaptations have evolved over many decades trying to create a balance between the source material and its adapted cinematic version. They have moved from the simple word-to-word representation of written literature on the screen to shaping the source material with picturization techniques to provide a new dimension to its plot, and characters and enhance the viewer's experience of the narrative. With various audio-visual techniques, film adaptations are successful in evoking deep emotions in the audience. However, beyond this superficially simplistic process of reproducing verbal signs of written literature into audio-visual images, lies a challenge of intricate inter-semiotic process. It is a creative act of reinterpretation and reproduction of verbal and imagined images into visualized images.

The new meaning is not only created but also negotiated through the interchange of various semiotic resources. In this context, film adaptation becomes not just a process of decoding written words but transcoding them. Also, in this method of rendering, the narrative elements of the source text are translated into the language of film using specific semiotic techniques of cinematography. For example, popular film adaptations such as *The Lord of the Rings* fantasy trilogy by J. R. R. Tolkien, *Harry Potter* by J. K. Rowling, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, and *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel show how AI-generated images and new camera techniques transform the verbal imagined images of these novels into fantastic visualized images. The directors of these films have created an unbelievably convincing world using green/blue screens, still-image cameras, puppeteering, scale doubles, detailed miniature sets (where characters are placed using the technique of scale doubles), forced perspective camera techniques (placing one actor closer to the camera and another further away creating an illusion of one figure larger than normal), use of MASSIVE – a software programme, digital 3D spaces, and use of CGI (Computer Generated Imagery), generating an illusion of magical world. With the new developments in AI, cameramen possess the ability to recreate on the screen anything that a human

being can imagine. Moreover, these special effects are used to construct an illusion of a real world which looks larger than life.

However, the inherent difference between semiotics of written literature and films poses challenges of omissions, additions, contradictions, and modifications, making a film deviate drastically from the source material. Additionally, the impact of cultural context cannot be ignored, especially in film adaptations. Producers may omit or add dialogues, scenes, or interpretations in their films that are contradictory to the source text. Moreover, iconophobia is prevalent in societies and people are logophiles considering the written word as sacred. So, the film adaptations, at times, are considered culturally inferior.

George Bluestone in his book, *Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema*, states: "Just a step behind the artist, and sometimes overtaking him, had been the shaping power of censor and audience. In the film, more than in any of the other arts, the signature of social forces is evident in the final work" (Bluestone 35). Nevertheless, these limitations also offer the possibilities of new interpretations, different perspectives, and creative pictorial innovations, generating a discursive space for the producers by recreating the written story for enhanced emotional impact. Film adaptations result from a dynamic dialogue between a filmmaker and a source material. Therefore, film adaptations should be looked at as an independent art though inspired and informed by written literature. Virginia Wolfe, though she calls film adaptations "a parasite", accepts: "But if a shadow at a certain moment can suggest so much more than the actual gestures and words of men and women in a state of fear, it seems plain that the cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression" (Woolf). New-age film adaptations contribute greatly to the tradition of story-telling, making it richer with its dynamic, pictorial, fantastic, and AI-generated semiotics. Different filmmakers use different semiotic strategies to create meaning. Therefore, George Bluestone remarks in his book: "[T]he great innovators of the twentieth century, in film and novel both, have had so little to do with each other, have gone their ways alone, always keeping a firm but respectful distance" (Bluestone 63). According to him, a novel is more about concepts whereas a film is concerned with perception.

Another influential book on the theory of adaptation is by Linda Hutcheon. She argues that adaptation does not mean a transposition of a story from one genre to another, but it is a very complex process of interaction between semiotics. According to Hutcheon, adaptation involves both duplication and modification, as the adapted work both copies the source material as well as deviates from it. Hutcheon's theory proved to be beneficial, especially to filmmakers, as it allowed them enough scope and discursive space to adapt and deviate at the same time from the source text. Moreover, as Linda Hutcheon states, a work of adaptation functions as an adaptation only for those who are familiar with the source material:

> If we do not know that what we are experiencing actually is an adaptation or if we are not familiar with the particular work that it adapts, we simply experience the adaptation as we would any other work. To experience it as an adaptation, however, as we have seen, we need to recognize it as such and to know its adapted text, thus allowing the latter to oscillate in our memories with what we are experiencing. (Hutcheon 120-121)

In line with George Bluestone's statement, "Like two intersecting lines, novel and film meet at a point, then diverge. At the intersection, the book and shooting script are almost indistinguishable. But where the lines diverge, they not only resist conversion; they also lose all resemblance to each other" (Bluestone 63), Ang Lee has adapted Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* into a 3D movie and created a world where CG images, humans, and nonhuman animals cohabit presenting a new model of co-existence which resembles as well as deviates from its source material. This intricate process of using tools available to film producers and cinematographers is rightly explained by Brian McFarlane in his book *Novel to Film*: "In fact, of course, all adaptations rework the source novel in the sense that film's signifying system will inevitably enjoin paradigmatic choices of a kind largely unavailable to novelists" (McFarlane 198).

Cinematography is more than a mere documentation of reality. The advent of CGI and other advanced cinematographic techniques challenged our conventional understanding of camera and motion picture which was solely based on the real characters and surroundings. The effective use of cinematographic techniques affects how viewers perceive and interpret the reality.

Cinematographers use an intricate play of movement, space and perspectives that help them create two-dimensional and three-dimensional pictures on the screen. Moreover, using these spatio-visual dynamics aided by camera techniques cinematographers create a new field of creative expression. They manipulate time and space to create a visual impact, for example, by editing and putting different shots together where the actor looks like a superhuman figure capable of extraordinary actions, reprinting the single image multiple times to create an effect of freezing a figure or action for an extended time, creating CG figures who can act against gravity or float like birds in the sky, etc. Also, computer-controlled cameras are used for the integration of different visual elements in the same shot and to create hypnotic patterns, GRASS – a programming language is used for rotation and scaling of CGI, optical printers and rotoscope animation are used to change focus and perspective in 2D animation, and travelling mattes are used to combine two separately shot movements to project them as one action. Additionally, a sonic landscape is created to enhance the effect of visuals. The soundscape of such a movie is made of a mixture of harmonic sounds and technopony such as the sound of a hammer to generate an impact of peril or fear.

CGI has impacted modern cinema hugely and has become an integral part of the film industry. The stunning visuals in new-age films make the distinction between a real image and CGI impossible. For example, the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* (1993) or King Kong in *King Kong* (2005). These digital creatures take more space and screen time than real human actors, especially in animal-centric movies. As animals have always occupied a substantial discursive space in the story-telling tradition of every literature, they also become actors in film adaptations. However, the use of animals in films has raised many questions about the ethical treatment of animals during shooting. Before the advancement of AI, moral dilemmas surrounding the use of animals in films created more controversies as film adaptations used real animals on stage contrary to the imagined animals in written literature. Nevertheless, with the new cinematographic technologies, especially CGI, cinematographers have successfully produced a fantastic world of animal stakeholders by creating a larger and more important cinematic space and screen time for them. This anti-anthropocentric initiative is evident in a 3D movie adaptation of the novel *Life of*

Pi. Moreover, the turn towards 3D makes remote, inaccessible, and fantastic spaces available for sensory experience. Ang Lee's movie is densely populated by digital creatures – the tiger, the hyena, the orangutan, the zebra, fish, meerkats, and so on.

Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi*, a story of a boy stranded on Pacific Ocean with a Bengal tiger was thought to be an unfilmable story for many years because of the fantastic imagery used by the author. Moreover, even Ang Lee who directed the film eventually and also won the Oscar for Best Director (*Life of Pi*) in 2012 mentions in an interview that it took him ten years to realize that it could be made into a movie. He also remarks that the third act of the novel was not movie-friendly as it involved building a fully digital co-star i.e. a tiger and creating water simulations to show ebb and flow of waves of the ocean. Ang Lee states in an interview: "I read it about ten years ago when it first came out. This is the kind of book friends introduce to each other … I didn't think it was a movie at all. I thought anybody thought that would be crazy" ("Ang Lee Director Interview on Life of Pi" 0:45 – 1:11). Furthermore, he describes his journey of four years of shooting *Life of Pi*, creating breathtaking and surreal scenes with seamless blend of CGI and the real images to bring imagined pictures of the novel onto the screen.

Martel's story is a literary pilgrimage of Pi that explains everything in minute details and it runs for three hundred and nineteen pages whereas Ang Lee tries to showcase the same story on the screen in two hours' time. Consequently, Lee has to leave many parts of the novel unexplored. Moreover, the biggest challenge faced by the film crew was to bring Martel's animal kingdom onto the screen, especially casting a full grown tiger was a tricky experiment. Lee spent a lot of time in discussion with his CGI team at Rhythm and Hues – an American visual effect and animation company, to cast his nonhuman actors successfully who couldn't read or won't take instructions from the director.

Life of Pi is a story of survival not of just a human being but also of an animal. Also, it is an animal-centric story and therefore animals are given agency and personhood in both the novel and its film adaptation. Novel starts with the detailed description of three-toed sloth bear whereas the credit sequence of its film adaptation shows different animals and birds engrossed in their activities

clearly indicating the larger literary space and screen time they have in the novel and the film respectively. However, in the beginning itself both novel and movie indicate the presence, interest, and intervention of human beings in the lives of animals as sloth bear is an object of analysis of Pi's zoology thesis and all animals and birds shown in the credit sequence of the film are in the zoo. Both the narratives show how literary devices and cinematographic techniques are used to showcase the personhood and agency of animals in these genres despite them being controlled by human beings.

Martel skillfully creates an animal kingdom in the form of a zoo. At the beginning of the novel readers are introduced to various types of animals, their behavioral traits, their habitats, their dietary needs, etc. Pi describes how he grew up among these animals: "Breakfast was punctuated by the shrieks and cries of howler monkeys, hill mynahs and Moluccan cockatoos. I left for school under the benevolent gaze of not only of Mother but also of bright-eyed otters and burly American bison and stretching and yawning orang-utans" (Martel 14). The elaborate depictions of the lives of animals described in the narrative did not find screen time in its cinematic adaptation. Though Lee shows animals in the background and audience can hear their calls, they do not occupy as much discursive space as they do in the novel. Pi, in the novel, also elaborates on ethics of zoo keeping business, animal behaviour in presence of human beings, flight distance of each animal, animal-training, animal cruelty, animal rights, animal personhood, etc. Nonetheless, he also shows his speciesist attitude when he advocates that zoos are a better habitat for wild animals than a jungle: "Animals in the wild lead lives of compulsion and necessity within an unforgiving social hierarchy in an environment where the supply of fear is high and the supply of food low and where territory must constantly be defended and parasites forever endured" (Martel 16).

The continuous shift in Pi's attitude from being a speciesist to non-speciesist is more vivid and articulate in the novel than in its film adaptation. At times, he questions the very foundation of anthropocentrism: "The obsession with putting ourselves at the centre of everything is the bane not only of theologians but also of zoologists" (Martel 31). However, Ang Lee has avoided screening these contemplative moments that challenge the basic foundation of

anthropocentrism and zoo-keeping and he has focused more on Pi-Parker relationship instead. Additionally, Lee has modified the source material to suit the genre of the film. He describes in an interview "Life of Pi – CGI making of (2012) HD" how he used to instruct Suraj Sharma who played the role of Pi in his younger days: "Forget about the story, forget about motivation. Just you and a tiger. Life or death. It's highly focused. Pure Cinema" ("Life of Pi - CGI making of (2012) HD" 10:33 – 10:39). Besides, novel as a genre gave a certain freedom to Martel as he doesn't have to cut short his story to make his readers complete it in a specified time; so he gives more discursive space to his animal characters and dives deeper into these philosophical discussions. Furthermore, in a flying fish scene, Ang Lee completely skips Pi's monologue where he misunderstands a hit by a flying fish as Richard Parker's attack and prepares himself to die. Instead, Lee focuses on creating the spectacular visual display of the flying fish scene. The CGI team used MASSIVE software to give brain to each fish to determine its movement at 120 frames per second, blurring the lines between imagination and reality and demonstrating the visually dynamic choreography that transported its audience to the very core of this adventurous journey.

Also, the cruelty that animals are subjected to during animal trafficking doesn't find much cinematographic presentation. Audiences only see these animals briefly before the ship sinks. Additionally, the detailed description of how hyena kills zebra, rips a hole in his stomach and starts to eat him alive is not shown on the screen. As the scene is shot, the camera cuts away showing Pi's sympathetic expression leaving zebra's suffering to audience's imagination. Likewise, orangutan is beheaded in the novel and her condition is described with minute pictorial details but all these details are replaced by an image of a motionless hand of orangutan in the film. These omissions seem speciesist as they minimize animal suffering, animal's pain and the attention is shifted to how Pi feels about it. Nonetheless, Lee has created screen space for these animals with the help of CGI when shooting the real animals was not ethically and practically possible. The entire seen of zebra jumping onto the boat is computer generated and it was added later on. There was no real zebra at the time of shooting. Also, orangutan is fully computer generated and there are only seven shots of real hyena in the movie.

Furthermore, Pi, in the novel, elaborates on how animals are trained in circus in Chapter 13 and 14. This information ultimately comes handy to Pi when he trains Richard Parker and shares lifeboat with him later in the novel. However, Lee skips most of these animal training details in his film adaptation and audiences directly see Pi effectively training Richard Parker on the lifeboat. Additionally, there is a substantial amount of explanation in the novel about how Pi spends many days on the carnivorous island and trains Richard Parker to jump through a hoop as done in the circus and this episode also doesn't find any representation in the movie. However, Thierry Le Portier, a tiger trainer whom Ang Lee consulted during the shoot of *Life of Pi*, states in an interview how changes were made in the film script as per his suggestions: "During the preparation of the movie we talked together about a tiger behavior. Is this behavior of a tiger on the boat realistic? And we rewrite certain scenes of the movie according to what I suggest" ("Life of Pi – CGI making of (2012) HD" 3:14 – 3:29).

Furthermore, Martel shows Pi and Richard Parker going through a journey, becoming skinnier day by day, and regaining their muscles during their long stay at the island before Pi discovers the sinister and mysterious secrets of the carnivorous island and leaves the island. Martel dedicates approximately 28 pages describing Pi's stay on the island, the lifestyle of meerkats – the only occupants of the island, and the successful training sessions of Richard Parker, but Lee condenses Pi's stays on the island and gives less than 10 minutes of screen time for the whole episode. Further, Pi is not shown gaining much weight during his stay on the island but Richard Parker on the other hand being a CG tiger is shown to have become much healthier. Lee explains in an interview, "Life of Pi – CGI making of (2012) HD", how he had to strategies his shooting schedule to shoot Pi getting skinnier over time.

Also, the novel provides more discursive space to even smaller creatures. For example, Pi describes the worms, small fish, and crabs of the ocean meticulously: "After that I noticed the black worms with the white spines, the green gelatinous slugs with the primitive limbs, the inch-long, motley-coloured fish with potbellies, and lastly the crabs, half to three-quarters of an inch across and brown in colour" (Martel 197). Lee also portrays smaller fish and creatures

with the help of CGI and creates a photographic spectacle but unlike its source material, he doesn't provide any spiritual or philosophical dimension to these creatures. However, these deviations and omissions can be justified as Lee had to rely on CGI for showing the intricacies of physical and emotional dimension of his animal actors. He expounds on the difficulties that his shooting crew faced in creating and blending the CG images and shots of real animals, to make his audience believe that they are looking at only real animals. Ang Lee also mentions that he and his whole team of actors and cinematographers studied the real animals like tigers and orangutans before creating CGI to replace them wherever it was impossible to shoot real animals:

> … and then we study the tigers … their muscles, their hair … little twitches … we have four types of animals, particularly tigers … we shoot a tiger first, then we shoot Pi, Suraj. And sometimes there's no way, you know, how to take it, though you can make the tiger do certain things. So we do the animation, show the actors, everybody knows how it's going to act … We get the approval from a trainer that the animal actually will do that for sure, then the little nuances … It took a couple of years to make it to realization. ("Ang Lee Director Interview on Life of Pi" 16:39 – 17:51)

However, the use of CGI empowers Lee to showcase the intimate relationship that Pi develops with Parker over a period of time. Making a departure from the novel, Lee adds a scene in the movie where Pi takes Richard Parker's head in his lap and cries when he feels that they are going to die soon out of hunger and exhaustion. Moreover, Lee makes Richard Parker a virtual co-star, respond positively to Pi's touch and creates a possibility for human-animal co-existence in the movie. This additional scene was possible because of the strenuous work done by the cinematographers. There are only 23 shots in the movie of real tigers, all other shots are CGI. However, the hard work of the cinematographers pays off and it is difficult to distinguish between a real tiger and a CG tiger as the following images illustrate:

(Fig. 1 Still from "Life of Pi – CGI making of (2012) HD" 4:13)

Like Martel, Lee maintains that the Japanese investigators accept the version of the story with the tiger instead of the story with only human beings. However, unlike Martel who ends his story with the report by Japanese investigators, Lee takes his audience back to the scene where Richard Parker walks away into the jungle without turning back to look at Pi, making the film adaptation more animal-centric. Both Martel and Lee have populated the novel and its film adaptation respectively with animals. Martel breathes life into his animals with his rich descriptive language, similes, metaphors, and his keen observation of the animal world, whereas Lee uses CGI and 3D technology capturing the minute details of the physicality of animals providing them a distinct character and personality. While both Martel and Lee portray animals with personhood, subjectivity, and agency, Martel provides more discursive space to all his animal characters, whereas Lee provides believable but still otherworldly visual spectacle for Martel's literary menagerie. Additionally, Lee adds a new scene in his film to depict the dilemma associated with anthropomorphism as Pi expresses to the writer his disappointment regarding the abrupt departure of Richard Parker.: "You know my father was right. Richard Parker never saw me as his friend. After all we had been through, he didn't even look back. But I have to believe there was more in his eyes than my own reflection staring back at me. I know it. I felt it. Even if I can't prove it" (*Life of Pi* 1:46:15 – 1:46:39).

Thus, the close analysis of Yann Martel's novel and its film adaptation reveals various challenges that both the novelist and the film maker had to

circumvent in order to have an effective formula for authentic representation of animals and their identities. Both the art forms, despite their limitations in capturing the living experiences of animals, add strong verbal and visual rhetoric respectively for animal rights sensibility and in promoting animal personhood.

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Suwarna Subhash Suryawanshi

Suwarna Subhash Suryawanshi is an accomplished Assistant Professor at K J Somaiya School of Engineering with 17 years of teaching experience. She holds an MA, MPhil and PhD in English Literature, and has qualified NET and SET. Her areas of expertise include English Literature, Phonetics, Speciesism, and Animal Rights. Suwarna has delivered various courses on Communication Skills and Business Communication Skills. She has published papers in esteemed journals and presented papers at national and international conferences.

Additionally, she has actively participated in workshops and training programs, showcasing her commitment to professional development. Suwarna's dedication to academia is further demonstrated through her involvement in various academic responsibilities, such as being in charge of the Language Laboratory and the Department Newsletter Committee.

Anima P.

Anima P. is an Assistant Professor at K J Somaiya School of Engineering, Somaiya Vidyavihar University, Mumbai. With over 10 years of teaching experience, Anima has developed and delivered courses such as Communication Skills, Employment Skills forEngineers, and Business Communication and Ethics. Anima holds an M.Phil and a postgraduate degree in English. Anima's academic journey includes securing the first rank with a gold medal in the M.A. English examination. She has also qualified the UGC_NET examination for lectureship. Specializing in Presentation and Communication Skills, Linguistics, film studies, ecocriticism, and ecocinema, she has published book chapters, journal articles and presented research papers in international and national conferences. Ms. Anima is actively involved in organizing workshops and conferences in her college and has also participated in many training programmes and faculty development programmes.

Dinesh Kumar Nair

Dr. Dinesh Kumar Nair (M.A., SET, Ph.D.) is Professor and Head of the English Research Centre at V. G. Vaze College, University of Mumbai. He specializes in Literary Theory, African American Literature, and Ecocriticism, with wide-ranging research interests spanning Critical Race Theory, Trauma and Pain Studies, Diaspora and Migration Studies, Cultural Politics, Ecocriticism, and Cyber Criticism. With over 30 years of teaching experience, Dr. Nair has guided numerous M.Phil. and Ph.D. scholars, presented more than 35 research papers, and published over 30 articles in reputed international journals and critical anthologies. His publications include the book *World War I: Centenary Hindsight* and co-authored works such as *Linguistic and Stylistic Analysis of Texts*, *Translation Studies*, and *Literary Theory* (University of Mumbai). He is

frequently invited as a resource person and keynote speaker at national and international conferences, delivering lectures on diverse themes including diaspora, cultural politics, ecocriticism, cyber criticism, and emerging literary trends. Beyond academia, Dr. Nair has contributed to corporate mentoring and training with organizations like L&T Infotech, ACT Logistics, and Christ Nishotech.