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Remapping the Human-Animal Boundary through relocation of Spaces: An Eco- critical Reading of *Life of Pi*

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Abstract:

In the recent times, the theoretical world has witnessed shaping and reshaping of several approaches that have taken a shape turn from anthropocentrism. This has subsequently led to an increased growth of literary and theoretical that attempts to advocate for the nonhumans. Of this effort, the most influential has been the recent development of Ecocriticism and Animal Studies that have often been recognized in close association through the efforts of the Second Wave of Ecocriticism. This attitude has opened possibilities for newer approaches, problems and deliberations. In this 'ethical turn', ecocriticism attempts to study the dynamic relationship shared between humans and the ecological world in close proximity in literary narratives. In this umbrella concept of ecocriticism, there has been branching of several sub-approaches like ecofeminism, postcolonial/ecocriticism, eco-Marxism, Deep Ecology and Animal Studies. In this article, an attempt would be made to foreground the nonhuman narrative and thereby acknowledge their presence in literature, culture and the ecosystem. This effort would be undertaken through the literary and cultural discourse of Human Animal Studies (HAS) that attempts to understand the complex relationship between humans and the nonhumans. The article would also attempt to critically study the fundamental concerns of HAS by exploring the complex politics of language and representation along with issues like space, ownership, 'othering', speciesism and anthropocentrism which have been aptly portrayed in the fictional narrative of Yann Martel's work, *Life of Pi* (2001). These central concerns have been critically revisited through the central characters Pi and the Bengal tiger in their (re)location to unknown and threatening spaces. The narrative also attempts to redefine the social stereotypes of human(ity) and animal(ity) through the tragic shipwreck wherein Pi loses his family- humans and nonhumans which consequently opens a series of (mis)adventures, realizations and



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dismantling of boundaries. Through the narrative, we travel between different spaces, like the cultured society, the endless oceanic world, zoological reserves and the ecology at large which opens newer possibilities and prospects of experiences for humans and the nonhuman animals that enables in the expansion of perception and social boundaries associated to them. These exposures show not only the speciesist and anthropocentric tendencies in human and animal relationship but also exposed the possibility of ‘companion species’ between humans and animals when they share close physical contact with each other that allows in the creation of interspecies space between them. This further appears as a counter-narrative that deconstructs the hegemonic perceived notions and codifications which not only shapes the dualistic relationship between humans and animals but also maintains the conventional power politics of naturalism, speciesism and anthropocentrism. In this regard, an eco-conscious investigation of the environment and nonhumans seem as a pivotal requirement to understand the role and identity of humans, especially in the Age of Anthropocene.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Speciesism, Human Animal Studies (HAS), Animality/Humanity, ‘companion species’, Anthropocene, Life of Pi.

In our fast progressing society, we are witnessing several radical shifts in knowledge, perceptions and theories with the emergence of new situations and possibilities that have increasingly opened new avenues for study. Such an approach has lead to additional recognition of new ideas that has been swiftly added to the theoretical world that attempts to transcend the social limitations of human boundaries as well as redefine existing notions. Amidst this flexible tendency, ecocriticism took a foundational shape that attempted to study the dynamic relationship between humans and the ecological world in literary narratives (Glotfelty xviii). Despite its recent birth, the approach has had a widespread association with other theories thereby making it a multi-disciplinary venture. In consequences, the efforts of ecocriticism have sharply shifted the traditional western ideologies of anthropocentrism and speciesism towards an ‘ethical turn’ for ecological narratives. This sudden realization was marked with the



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acknowledgement of the ‘dying’ Earth during the 1990s that was also declared as “the decade of the environment” by the U.S. President (Glotfelty, xvi). This dire situation called in for awareness and urgency over the understanding of the physical environment which was adversely effected by mainstream ideologies of anthropocentrism and speciesism that channelized human ego to consider themselves as the supreme authority with intrinsic value while perpetually ‘othering’ the rest of existence into secondary and marginalized roles. In keeping themselves associated to ecosystem as a general area of study, eco-critics had maintained their apprehension towards Animal Studies that attempted to focus their considerations to a singular organism. However, this notion was revisited with the second wave of ecocriticism that witnessed the expansion of concerns and dialogue from the initial nature writings to include literary, theoretical and cultural parameters. As a consequence, there was an increasing realization of the dependence and interrelations of nonhuman animals as an integral component to understand the complexity of the environment as well as humans. This expansion highlights that nothing “exist in isolation, but emerge in intimate relation to one another, as part of an intricate pattern of power dictating the way the world is formulated” (Rajamannar 2). In this regard, ecocriticism appears to be an umbrella concept which has witnessed subsequently branching of associated studies of which Animal Studies has been the most forceful. The main task of Human Animal Studies (HAS) has been to foreground the nonhuman animals as *real subjects* and not merely as *reel objects*. It further attempts to understand the complex and dynamic relationship between humans and the nonhuman animals. In this trend, ecocriticism traces the conceptions of animal liberation both in theory and practice, as both essentially are a forum of resistance to discriminations, exploitations and oppression. In this regard, the term ‘animal’ has been used as a generalized and homogeneous concept that has been blind to the variations within the animal species. This indicates that animals are not merely physical presences in the ecosystem but also a cultural discourse that humans have created and maintained as the other for a balanced identity, humanity and recognition of the self. In consequences, animals become agents that are in difference to humans as they lack linguistic, emotional and reasoning capacities. Subsequently, they are not



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only placed opposite but also outside humans as they are referred savage, amoral, instinctive and silent beasts while humans have been seen as agents of rationality as well as emotional and linguistic capabilities that enables them to maintain a structured consciousness to bear meaning to the world. These repeated stereotyping of animals have reduced them to an instrumental object that has been frequently romanticized for narrations. In this context, animals are pushed to the margins with minimal visibility and representation. Such reductionism has limited the scope of interrogating the real subjects which thereafter attempts to categorically justify the exploitations and abuses channelized towards animals in the name of anthropocentrism, speciesism, development, and research. These concerns found a platform through the efforts of eminent critics like Peter Singer (1975 and 1985), Jacques Derrida (2002), Graham Huggan and Helena Tiffin (2006), Donna J. Haraway (2008), Anat Pick (2011) and Paul Walden (2013) to name a few. In this article, an attempt would also be made to trace the (re)location of humans and nonhuman animals in different spaces as an extension to understand the socially codified behaviors and actions along with a probable alternate reality with a post-speciesist attitude that emphasizes on contact between species which would eventually open up scope for the process of 'in-becoming' as 'companion species'. Such an effort has been spectacularly traced and developed by the Canadian writer Yann Martel in his famous novel *Life of Pi* (2001) which has dealt with several concerns ranging from postcolonial, capitalism, spirituality, human(ity) and animal(ity), culture/nature dichotomy, to name a few. All these parameters together not only adds texture to the magnificent journey of Pi but also deconstructs the notion of 'one story' about human-animal interaction that has been narrated and reinforced to us through discursive social agencies through generations. Such claims have been indicated by Yann Martel through the central characters Piscine Molitor Patel and Richard Parker, the Royal Bengal tiger in their relocation to unknown and threatening spaces, we witness a rearrangement of human-animal boundaries that dismantles the previously reinforced dichotomy between them by alternating it with a neutral inter-species territory. In this regard, the limited space of the lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean appears as a place of conflict, training centre as well as companionship, mutual respect



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and tolerance. In these encounters, we witness a constant shift of relationship, boundaries, interactions and roles between humans and the nonhuman animals that also attempts to redefine the social stereotypes of human(ity) and animal(ity). This has been discussed through the tragic shipwreck wherein Pi loses his family- humans and nonhumans which consequently opened a series of misadventures, realization and self-discovery. Through the narrative, we travel between different spaces, like the cultured society, the endless oceanic world, zoological reserves, exceptional island and the ecology at large. In these different locations, we witness newer possibilities and prospects experienced by humans and the nonhuman animals when they are exposed to locations that are predominately not considered as a human and a tiger's territory.

The relationship between humans and animals are not only bounded by imaginative and cultural conditioning but has also been encountered through physical spatial locations wherein they interact to reinforce as well as dismantle pre-designed notions. In this regard, 'space' becomes a necessary conception as it extends to become a site of generative roles which replete over-determined cultural meanings rather than an inert and empty background wherein a narrative takes place. Subsequently, this makes 'space' as "something that is represented, experienced, and produced through multifaceted spatial codes" that has been reinforced and naturalized by social, historical and ideological construct (Son 7-8). In consequence, the *presence* of space as a background location in narratives appears to be bygone as it significantly plays a pivotal role in the development of the narration, characters and situations represented. In this regard, spaces become a 'living zone' that affects the physical, emotional, behavioral and metaphorical aspects of the narration as it "implies, contains, and dissimulates social relationships" in them (Son 6). Through such efforts, *reallocations* and fictional settings in narratives become mutually constitutive with elastic networks and relations, thereby making such narratives a study of intertextuality by producing multiple version of the location (Hones 70). In this regard, the narrative structure indicates the importance of location in the novel which has been divided into three distinct parts, namely 'Toronto and Pondicherry', 'The Pacific Ocean' and 'Benito Juarez Infirmary, Tomatlan, Mexico'. This structure emphasizes the strong



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influence of (re)location that has directed the narration to an overwhelming exploration of natural reality that has been beyond all human experiences and imagination thereby creating an everlasting philosophy in the life of Pi wherein he re-discovers himself through the unknown and invincible forces of nature that he encounters during his long 227 days of shipwreck on the Pacific Ocean.

Although the novel opens in Toronto, the narration maintains a strong balance between past and present through the techniques of memory, stream of consciousness and flashbacks that Piscine Mortine Patel inculcates to describe his tragic shipwreck to Francis Adirubasamy. The initial part of the novel shifts between Pondicherry and Toronto that Pi calls his 'home' which for him was essentially a hub of culture, social relationship and conditioning, knowledge and modernity. However, the essential difference between the two is that in the Indian timeline, Pi was a young boy who lived his childhood surrounded by animals which developed a sense of connection and responsibility within him for them. Despite the filial relationship, we also witness the perpetual *Othring* of animals that have been forced to live in an artificially created space for comfort and protection. Although these enclosed spaces may create an illusion of their natural home in the wild but unfortunately in these limited spaces of conditioning, the animals are deprived of their full growth, identity, freedom, dignity and potentials which makes them queer and "not dangerous absconding criminals but simply wild creatures seeking to fit in" (Martel 42). In this regard, a zoological reserve becomes "a cultural institution. Like a "public library, like a museum, it is at the service of popular education and science" along with other primary aims like entertainment, conservation and eco-tourism (Martel 78). Such claims have been addressed by Dale Jamieson who agrees to Stephen Kellert in his essay "Against Zoos" that despite these emancipating motives of zookeepers and zoo-goers, there has been "same prejudices about animals as the general public" (135). Such an attitude reconfirms the disassociation of 'Greater Good' with zoological reserves which Yann Martel depicts in his novel. For him, the 'zootown' was a means of ecotourism that aimed to generate monetary profits. In addition, Martel emphasizes that zoos have been created and modified not for the



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comfort of the nonhuman animals but for having an increasing influx of tourists which remain indifferent to these wild creatures. In this situation, the animals of the zoo are regarded as ‘guests’ who stink and are “unhygienic as alcoholics” that are constantly demanding, complaining and impatient with slow service (Martel 13). Further for the interest of the visitors, animals are trained to get “used to the presence of humans” through a strict and restricted food supply so as to simulate conditions of the wild (Martel 39). In this regard, the zoo becomes a meeting place for culture and the wild nature. Far from the reality of the ‘nightmare’ of ‘zootown’, Pi regards the zoological reserves as a “paradise on earth” which indicates his mechanical learning and social conditioning of the nature/culture and human/animal dichotomy. In response to such a belief system, Pi finds it misleading to believe that animals in the wild are ‘happy’ and ‘free’. For Pi, “animals in the wild are, in practice, free neither in space nor in time, nor in their personal relations” as they live in “compulsion and necessity within an unforgiving social hierarchy in an environment” (Martel 16). This idea has been explored by Martel when Pi was shipwrecked in the Pacific Ocean with an unusual crowd of an adult Bengal tiger, a ‘carnivorous savannah’ dwelling hyena, a wounded zebra and a ‘frugivorous tree’ dwelling orang-utan, all of which that have been rooted out from their natural locations to be placed together in an incredible and impossible situation (Martel 122-123). In this grouping, Pi observed the complex hierarchy in the food chain and the power dominance among species through the attacks of the ‘devouring’ hyena that were first aimed at the wounded zebra followed by the seasick orang-utan. In this regard, a zoo becomes another territory which was a smaller version of the physical environment where “we do for animals what we have done for ourselves with houses” so that they don’t feel like a ‘nervous tenant’ and a ‘prisoner’ but like a ‘landholder’ (Martel 17). In such situations, we realise that animals have been *silenced* as a subaltern category that has been marginalised with no apparent *presence*. This consequently leads to (mis)representation due to their limitation and politics of linguistic and reasoning capacities.



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These cultural reservations of Pi make it difficult for him to adjust to the unusual crowd in the lifeboat after his tragic shipwreck in the Pacific Ocean. In this situation, he experienced spiritual and social destabilization as he felt like the “odd one out” as he was the sole representative of the cultured existence (Martel 123). In this regard, the shipwreck seems not only like a battle for life limited to physical extremities but also a mental exhaustion. In this regard, the profound (mis)adventure in the oceanic ecosystem of the Pacific embarks Pi’s majestic journey of knowing, unknowing and rediscovery of the self, existence and ecology. In this newfound situation, Pi felt threatened as well as concerned and responsible towards the zebra, tiger and the orang-utan. This was because their presence had distracted the hyena from his *presence*. This attitude indicates the deep influence of speciesism and anthropocentrism that justifies non-thoughtful and provoking sacrifices of the nonhumans. This has been an outcome of the social construction wherein humans are considered superior to the rest of existence and the means to their end (Singer, *Animal Liberation* 203). Further, with the death of the hyena by the Bengal tiger, Pi realised the impending danger approaching him in the form of the tiger whom he quickly attacks along with his cries “get lost. Drown” (Martel 99). In this attitude, Pi plans to kill Richard Parker through a well strategized scheme. However, this changed with the realization of the ferocity and power of the beast that determined Pi to claim his superiority as the ‘super-alpha male’ in their alpha-omega relationship. For this, he devised a training program that acted as a means of distraction for Pi from the monotonous life in the ocean as well as for surviving the wild instincts of the impending threat by Richard Parker. To achieve this purpose, Pi frequently used the rescue whistle to control and discipline the tiger along with the strategic training program that Pi devised where he

had to make him understand that I was the top tiger and that his territory was limited to the floor of the boat, the stern bench and the side benches as far as the middle cross bench. I had to fix in his mind that the top of the tarpaulin and the



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bow of the boat, bordered by the neutral territory of the middle bench, was *my* territory and utterly forbidden to him (Martel, 168).

These activities made the lifeboat resemble “a zoo enclosure more and more” with a separate area for Richard Parker where his survival needs were facilitated by Pi as maintained in the ‘zootown’ (Martel 189). In this regard, ‘space’ added a sense of dignity, identity and security to Pi as well as to Richard Parker who was essentially a ‘territorial’ being that used their urine to “mark the boundaries of their territory” (Martel 171). In consequences to this development, Pi realised the importance of ‘territorial ownership’ to maintain equilibrium with Richard Parker resulting in the invention of the raft which he declared as his space by splashing his urine over it along with the tarpaulin and the locker lid. This was done as tigers rely on smell rather than hearing vision. In this regard, the artificial and superficial remapping of space by Pi shaped their physical, emotional and behavioural patterns. Along with them, the underwater deadly sharks, turtles, fishes, whales, dolphins and the birds together form a ‘baffling ecosystem’ on the lifeboat which shows the possibility of nature to hold never-ending surprises. Amidst them, Pi saw himself as ‘another animal’ whose was no longer “a harmless boy, bookish and religious” as his human(ity) had been stained with blood of all the sentient that he killed for himself and For Richard Parker’s survival (Martel 169 and 183). In fact, he sacrificed his vegetarianism and pacifism to become a ‘fiend’ that consumed raw meat that he relished. In this situation, he realizes his animality which tempted him to tilt his urine beaker that “looked delicious” (Martel 142 and 172). These changes highlight the paradox of animal(ity) that Pi seeks to dominate and control in Richard Parker. This shift in Pi was not only ideological but also physical with a diminishing spirit and willpower due to the harsh bleaching of Pi and Richard Parker with the constant exposure to the sun, wind, rain and sea. In addition to the physical appearances, their sleep routine, food habits, and behavioural patterns also changed but this “was nothing compared to the moral torture” (Martel 241). These radical changes in Pi highlight his process of in-becoming due to his contact with the tiger. This consequently opened the scope for dismantling



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boundaries of human(ity) and animal(ity) which were no longer rigidly defined but became a fluid and floating concept. With their second return to the oceanic ecosystem, Pi and Richard Parker became desperate with their endless suffering which reduced them as “two emaciated mammals, parched and starving” (Martel 239). These severe changes simultaneously had an adverse affect on the psychology, emotions and behaviours of Pi and Richard Parker that lead to their eventual subjugation to the invincible ecology.

Amidst this, Pi's constant company was the majestic Bengal tiger, Richard Parker with whom he shared an ambivalent relationship of love and hate, superiority and inferiority, companion and enemy, hope and threat. This has been a consequence to the repeated social conditioning and stereotyping the wild beast as a ferocious, merciless and bloodthirsty creature that attacks any invaders into his territory. However in this unusual situation, Pi experiences not only the brute force of nature and the wild instincts of Richard Parker but also an alternate reality of minimal aggression shown by the tiger as he was constantly drowsy and nauseated due to seasickness and sedation from the salty waters of the ocean. This situation was used by Pi for his benefit as he added salty water to the fresh water that Pi provided to Richard Parker along with his food. This was done to control the natural stimulations of the tiger along with his faeces cleaning and sniffing by Pi as a means for psychological bullying to train for the alpha-omega relationship between them. In this sense, Richard Parker never experienced real freedom even in the boat as his behavioural pattern was manipulated and controlled by the actions of Pi. However, this power driven relationship evolved through their prolonged contact that allowed the process of 'in-becoming' which for Haraway has been a pre-requisite to 'companion species' which she minutely explored in her seminal work, *When Species Meet* (2008). These concepts have become an influencing factor in forming a neutral ground for associating with the world beyond humanism. This new attitude had paved way for the recent approach of posthumanism which has been gaining visibility and contributions through the efforts of eminent writers like Donna J. Haraway, Cary Wolfe, Jacques Derrida to name a few. This development has been marked in the relationship between Pi and Richard which evolved from fear, death and threat to



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reassured hope, tolerance, mutual respect and companionship. In fact, for Pi, the Royal Bengal tiger was no longer an *outside* animal as they formed a companionship which was different from human exchange as it was “offered to the loneliness of man as a species” (Herron 157). Such an experience of intimate contact with the tiger enabled Pi to the state of ‘in becoming’ where he *hears* and *sees* the multitude of signs, sounds, responses and movements of the animal which were previously unheard and neglected. This recognition further influenced his process of rediscovering his animalistic potentials which had been made sophisticated and repressed in his personality through repeated conditioning by cultural discourses. In consequence, Pi dreamt and imitated Richard Parker in his semi-conscious mind which traded on him even after the shipwreck. However, this close contact between species has not been a single episode occurrence but a series of incidents that (re)shaped their relationship through the long shipwreck of 227 days in the Pacific Ocean. In consequence, Pi regarded the tiger not as a threat but as his “fellow castaway” “the one who scared me witless to start with was the very same who brought me peace, purpose, I dare say even wholeness” (Martel 162). In this context, Pi became an agency of animal(ity) in the narration that attempted to dismantle the binary relationship of human(ity) and animal(ity). Such an effort enabled the inclusion of alternate dialogues between humans and the nonhuman animals that further attempted to widen the boundaries of Animal Studies in cultural and literary narratives.

The evolving bond with Richard Parker in different spatial locations shows the flexible and accommodating characteristics of Pi that helps in exploring the multiple versions of his selfhood, capacities, potentials, perceptions and motives. In addition to this new consciousness, the religious tolerance of Pi added dynamism to his self-enriching journey of spiritual refinement, motivation, co-existence, compassion and confidence. In this regard, the *presence* of Richard Parker became an internalised force in the thoughts, heart and spirit. This influence was not a momentary situation but a lifetime communion as “Richard Parker still preys on his mind” in his life in Toronto (Martel 42). In this regard, we witness a subtle process of ‘in becoming’ through personal and intimate ‘contact species’ leading to the eventual relationship of



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‘companion species’ between Pi and Richard Parker, whose influence changes the personality, philosophy and perceptions of Pi. In this regard, their relationship cannot be traced in the conventional notion of human-animal boundary. In fact, it opens new vista for exploration and discussion to become a pivotal force to reduce the generalized tension between humans and animals.

This experience of ‘contact species’ radically shifted the relationship maintained by Pi with nonhuman animals as seen through his domestic pets Tata and Moccasin who were an integral part of the family and therefore shared a space *inside* the house. In this new perception, Pi values the essence of co-existence, tolerance, mutual respect and companionship for all creatures which encouraged his gradual blurring of the conventional ideologies like anthropocentrism and speciesism. In consequence, the power binary of human(ity) and animal(ity) gets destabilized to expose unheard narrations. Influenced by decentrality, Pi respects the naturalness of creation which has been evident in his professional choice of his research study of sloths in the natural wildlife with minimal human intervention. In this regard, he becomes a symbol of antivivisectionism and anti-speciesism who upheld sentiments like patience, compassion and dignity over oppressive and discriminatory vivisections that were generally performed in the name of science, research, development and industries. Such a radicalshift in perception was not only because of maturity by age but also due to the humbling (mis)adventures in the unfamiliar oceanic ecosystem that taught Pi the virtues of co-existence, tolerance, mutual respect and ‘companion species’.

Martel through his modernist novel, *Life of Pi* attempts to not only explore the stereotyping of human-animal boundaries but also highlight a crossing of reinforced notions like anthropocentrism and speciesism that have reduced our perceptions and experiences to a unidirectional representation. Such an attempt of crossing the human-animal borders has been made possible by Martel through the lifeboat that allowed for the creation of a space that was neutral for interspecies exchange. Despite the overarching presence of Richard Parker, we rarely



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witness his perception which shows his marginalisation of animals in narration. In this context, the presence of the animal was *needed* as an extension to human identity through the ‘alter-ego’ representation of the animal that functions as an opposing mirror image to humans. In the end of the novel, the separation was normalised by Richard Parker who returns to the wild environment while Pistruggles to maintain his new perceptions and knowledge which were conflicting with the previously maintained social ideologies. In consequences, Pifelt displaced throughout the interview with the Japanese representatives of the Maritime Department of the Ministry of Transportas their reject the original story with the real incidents of the shipwreck for a made-shift ‘story’ that appealed the limited human knowledge and perceptions, social conformities and imagination. In this regard, the episode was not a simple rejection of a ‘story’ but a rejection to hear the real voices, signs, behaviours and stories of the nonhuman animals which further pushes them to a marginalised space of inferiority and secondary existence. This relationship has been fuelled by human obsession with egoism, anthropocentrism and speciesism that has devalued the nonhumans as well as justified their abuses, oppression, exploitations and discriminations towards the animals in the name of humanity, welfare and development.

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