

# Comparative Analysis of Narrative Techniques in Fiction and Film with Reference to *Life of Pi*

Somnath Borude,<sup>1\*</sup> Balasaheb Sagade<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, Arts, Commerce and Science College, Satral - 413713 (MS), India

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of English, New Arts, Commerce and Science College, Ahilyanagar – 413713 (MS), India

(Name of the Research Center: Department of English, New Arts, Commerce and Science College, Ahilyanagar – 413713 (MS), India)

Corresponding author E-mail: [somnath.borude@pravara.in](mailto:somnath.borude@pravara.in) (Phone: +91-8668378760)

Received: 13 January, 2025 | Accepted: 29 January, 2025 | Published: 05 February, 2025

**Abstract:** The present paper aims to provide a comparative analysis of narrative techniques in the novel and film versions of *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel and its film adaptation directed by Ang Lee in 2012. The paper seeks to explore the ways in which different media convey the same philosophical and thematic issues. The novel employs narrative framing, retrospective narrative, and metafiction to emphasize the narrative act and explore issues of truth, faith, and belief. Moreover, it employs interior monologues and symbols to create ambiguity, particularly in Pi's accounts of his survival at sea. On the other hand, the film reworks these narrative techniques by incorporating filmic techniques such as imagery, color, sound, and setting. While the novel focuses on psychological depth and narrative ambiguity, the film focuses on emotional depth and visual transcendence. By drawing on theories of adaptation, narratology, and intermediality, this paper aims to explore how narrative is translated from verbal to visual storytelling, uncovering its potential and limitations.

**Keywords:** Narrative Techniques; Fiction and Film; Adaptation Studies; *Life of Pi*; Framed Narrative; Visual Storytelling; Intermediality

## Introduction

The relationship between literature and cinema has been a subject of critical inquiry for a long time, especially in terms of adaptation and narrative transformation. Fiction and film are both forms of medium that share a deep concern for storytelling, but they are sharply different in representation. The traditional way of reproducing events, character development, theme representation, and audience engagement for both films and fiction involve using narrative techniques. However, operational modes for such techniques obviously differ due to formal and material differences inherent in verbal and visual storytelling. A comparative study of the use of narrative techniques in fiction and films thus provides valuable insight into how stories are reshaped when they move from the written word to the screen. This research paper undertakes such an analysis with specific reference to *Life of Pi* through Yann Martel's novel, 2001, and its acclaimed film adaptation by Ang Lee in 2012.

The trend in adaptation studies has shifted away from analyzing films based on book texts. Researchers such as Linda Hutcheon and Robert Stam have discovered the process of adaptation to be a form of creative storytelling in which the narrative is adapted to fit the medium. As fiction transitions from text to film, aspects such as narrative voice, point of view, narrative structure, symbolism, or narrative ambiguity have to be recalibrated in light of the film medium. *Life of Pi* is a prime example text because of its complex narrative structure. The book by Yann Martel incorporates first-person narrative, framing, and narrative ambivalence to investigate the nature of truth, faith, and the rhetoric of storytelling.

Through visual imagery and emotional response, the adaptation by Ang Lee brings all these techniques together. In the absence of inner narration, it is clear that the story in the book is conveyed to the audience from Pi's perspective in a visual form and with emotional response. The two stories, as if they are two independent works, will be comparatively analyzed in this study to display how fiction and movies present a single story in different ways yet retaining similar aspects.

## Review of Literature: Adaptation Theory and Narratology

Adaptation studies and narratology provide a significant insights in understanding the process of adaptation from novel to film. In the earlier days of adaptation studies, adaptations were largely measured in terms of their closeness to the original work. How closely the film adhered to the novel in terms of storyline, characters, and ideas was the criteria for analyzing adaptations. In recent days, this has been disputed by critics such as George Bluestone, who has brought out the inherent differences between the two art forms of literature and film. Novels are reflection-driven with language being the medium, while films are image-driven with sound being the medium. Hence it is impossible to achieve complete authenticity in adaptations.

More recent theorists, such as Linda Hutcheon and Robert Stam, see the process of adaptation in terms of creativity and dialogics rather than mimicry. Other narratologists, such as Genette, Chatman, and Bordwell, analyze in greater depth the way in which narrative strategies based on point of perspective, time, and point of view shift from one media platform to another. These concepts, in turn, will resolve how the narrative of *Life of Pi* is adapted in order to fit the best purposes of storytelling in cinematic media.

## Narrative Techniques in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (Novel)

*Life of Pi*, written by Yann Martel in 2001, is a complex and multifaceted story that uses a variety of sophisticated narrative methods to examine the interrelated themes of belief, truth, survival, and the power of narrative as an imaginative tool. The narrative complexity in *Life of Pi* extends not simply because it is an action-packed story but also because it plays skillfully with the strategic use of narrative structure, voice, narrative perspective, and meaning as a narrative symbol that highlights story as a narrative tool to comprehend human experience.

One of the most prominent narrative techniques is the framed structure adopted throughout *Life of Pi*. The book starts with an unnamed author figure who introduces the story of Pi Patel, offering a story that "will make you believe in God" (Martel). This framing device establishes a multi-layered narrative in which Pi's first-person account is filtered through another narrator. A frame narrative establishes some standoffishness between the actual reader and described events, enhancing authenticity while raising questions about reliability. According to Gérard Genette, a frame narrative often "multiplies levels of narration," complicating the reader's relationship to narrative truth (Genette 228). In *Life of Pi*, such a technique underlines the very core of the novel-speaking to belief and interpretation.

The book is written mostly in first-person retrospective narration, enabling Pi to tell his life history as an adult. The narration enables a subjective exploration of Pi's mind and emotions in addition to underlining the subjective nature of memory. The reflective nature of Pi's personality helps to explore philosophical concepts such as religion and zoology and survival strategies. As first-person narrators do with readers to influence their reactions through strategies such as selective revelations and interpretations, as pointed out by Booth (159): "The first-person narrator deliberately tries to influence his readers."

Another key narrative stratagem is the use of unreliable narration, especially in the terminal conclusion of the novel. After presenting the incredible survival experience in which Pi survives in the presence of a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker, Pi goes on to offer an alternative account that is harsher and more realistic and features no animals. This ambivalence in narration effectively blurs the lines that distinguish fact and fiction in a narrative, requiring the reader to become an active interpreter and select the alternative that he or she prefers. Indeed, Martel makes this clear in Pi's words: "Which is the better story?" (Martel 352).

Martel employs symbolism and allegory as literary devices to a great extent. The journey on the lifeboat represents an allegorical world where abstract concepts like faith, hope, and coexistence take on concrete forms. Richard Parker stands for Pi's instinct for survival, while the ocean stands for the mysteries of God and the isolation present in the world. As Northrop Frye explains the mechanism of allegorical narratives: "Allegorical narrative translates ideas into images" (Frye 90). Martel uses the same device to combine philosophical queries with actions that form the narrative.

The non-linear and episodic nature of the novel increases the complexity of the narrative. The novel is categorized into three sections: Pi's childhood, his experience at sea with the tiger, and the aftermath. These sections keep oscillating between realism and fantasy and the past and the present. The changes in the narrative structure are reflected in the protagonist's psychology and the nature of traumatic experiences. This format of

the narrative is termed as the chronotope and the concept was described by Mikhail Bakhtin. According to Bakhtin, “time and space must be understood as the chronotope” (Bakhtin 84).

Moreover, Martel employs metafictional components that illustrate the fictional process of storytelling. Through this, the reader understands that this novel, in fact, does not just narrate but rather explores why such narratives are crucial. Linda Hutcheon states that metafiction “subverts narrative authority” by pointing to its own fictional process (Hutcheon, 27). Within *Life of Pi*, this indicates that this fictional process of storytelling in the novel underlines the importance of the theme of “belief.”

### **Narrative Techniques in Ang Lee’s *Life of Pi* (Film)**

Ang Lee's film version of *Life of Pi* (2012) is a serious reworking of Yann Martel's novelistic text into a visual and cinematic medium. Remaining true to the source text's core philosophical concerns—faith, truth, survival, and storytelling—the film speaks to meaning through distinctly cinematic narrative means. By using framing devices, visual symbolism, sound design, digital imagery, and controlled narrative perspective, this film took an inner-oriented, first-person literary narrative and turned it into an immersive audiovisual experience.

The framing narrative is one of the most evident procedures in the movie. Similar to the novel, Ang Lee's movie starts with a grown-up Pi telling his story to a writer figure, but Ang Lee changes this frame by using performance, dialogue and visual hints rather than authorial comment. The presence of adult Pi stabilizes narrative authority at the same time it retains its ambiguity. According to Seymour Chatman, filmic narration “does not speak in words but in images, sounds, and movements” (Chatman 124). The framing device works, therefore visually, in positioning its audience as auditors to a remembered story rather than readers of a text.

**The most striking narrative approach that the movie adopts is the visualization of the narrative to the point where the use of internal monologue is substituted. In the book, Pi’s thoughts and his philosophical ideas can be expressed in language; in the movie, these are expressed in images and rhythm. This is because long shots of the sea, the patterns of light and darkness, and the immensity of the sky all contribute to the isolation and spiritual meditations of Pi. David Bordwell observes that film narratives usually bring about subjective experiences “not by stating thoughts but by shaping perceptual experience” (Bordwell 96).**

Symbolism and visual metaphor are equally important in the narrative technique in the film. The ocean is a symbolic realm of uncertainty, divinity, and transformation, and the lifeboat is a microcosm of coexistence and survival. Richard Parker, the Bengal tiger, is depicted using photorealistic digital effects so that he assumes a dual role as a real animal and a symbolic representation of Pi's primitive nature. According to Robert Stam, “transcoding verbal metaphors into visual metaphors is a major function of film as a medium” (Stam 45). In *Life of Pi*, symbolic contents are conveyed through typical visual motifs and not language.

The manipulation of time through editing is another narrative device used in the film. The film moves from Pi's childhood, shipwreck, and the survival experience on sea using cross editing and dissolves. The film runs through events in quick succession. This is due to the nature of film narrative, according to Brian McFarlane, as it has the capability to manipulate time (McFarlane 78). The film director, Ang Lee, however, ensures that while telling the survival experience, it is emotionally connected with the audience.

The movie also incorporates sound design and music for narrative purposes. The sound track by Mychael Danna highlights Pi's emotional and spiritual journey by serving almost as a narrator himself. Silence is also deployed at opportune moments when a character feels hopelessness and awe, and it is left to the discernment of the audience to interpret those moments. According to Michel Chion, sound in cinema helps "guide interpretation and emotional response" (Chion 9). Sound and silence in *Life of Pi* are equally important for narrative construction.

One important moment comes towards the end of the film, which is related to the alternative version of Pi's storytelling. Unlike the novel, which does this through dialogue, the film does it through subtle acting. Pi's question: "Which story do you prefer?" is directed at the audience, thus establishing its metafiction aspect. This part retains its ambiguous theme as was found in the earlier novel, though it is suitably modified as per film storytelling techniques. According to Linda Hutcheon, "Adaptations frequently reinterpret ambiguity as opposed to repeating it verbatim" (Hutcheon 86), which Ang Lee does skillfully at the end of his film.

### **Comparative Analysis of Narrative Techniques in *Life of Pi*: Novel and Film**

A comparison of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (novel) and Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* (film) shows how narrative strategies are refashioned in the new media while maintaining the thematic preoccupations. Even as both the novel and the film tell the same story of survival, there are so sharply variant narrative modes, narrative perspectives, systems of symbols, frames, and treatment of ambiguity due to the different properties of the fictional and the cinematic.

**The novel's narrative structure is layered and self-reflexive in nature. Consisting of three parts—Pi's childhood in India, his survival at sea, and the post-rescue interview—the novel is interconnected through a framed narrative introduced by an author-figure. This enables philosophical digressions and reflective pauses that encourage readers to go along slowly with Pi's developing worldview. While the tripartite structure remains in the film version, the latter streamlines the narrative for cinematic pacing. Compositing visual montage and cross-cutting compress time and reduce digression to produce a more continuous and emotionally driven narrative flow. According to Brian McFarlane, film adaptations often reshape the structure of the source novel to maintain the engagement of the audience and achieve coherence in terms of time.**

**The narrative perspective is another important area of disparity. The novel features a retrospective narrative told from a first-person perspective, allowing readers immediate access to the thoughts, opinions, and reservations of the protagonist, Pi. This interiority plays a pivotal role in exploring faith and narrative perspectives in the novel. The film, in an attempt to showcase a subjective narrative experience, avoids narrative monologues altogether. Ang Lee attempts to retrieve a subjective point of view of Pi through camera angles, light, sound, and acting, without explicit narrative. David Bordwell observes, "Cinema prefers a subjective point of view signaled by a perceptual operation, not a direct appeal to consciousness" (Bordwell, 96).**

The symbolism in both works operates in distinct ways. In the novel, the symbolism appears through language and reflection. Pi himself spells out these various symbols and encourages the reader to discern these literary meanings. By contrast, there is a transformation of these literary symbols into pictorial metaphors in

the cinematic translation. The reality of Richard Parker's presence in photorealistic terms asserts both its reality and its symbolic significance, and further pictorial details such as reflections, light, and colors entail a transcendent aspect. Robert Stam indicates how "verbal metaphors and signs are transmuted into visual signs" in cinematic adaptations (Stam 45) and this is precisely what occurs in *Life of Pi*.

The framing device also works differently across the two media. In the novel, the author-figure foregrounds constructedness in the story and brings into question issues of authenticity and authorship. It is a metafictional framing that fits with the novel's placing of narration as an act of belief. The film also retains the frame of an older Pi narrating his story but minimizes explicit self-reflexivity. Instead, framing through performance and *mise-en-scène* subtly puts the viewers in place as listeners. Seymour Chatman's assertion—that film narration functions by showing rather than telling—allows the understanding of this shift (Chatman 124)

Perhaps the biggest point of comparison is in the novel's and film's treatment of ambiguity. The novel explicitly presents two versions of Pi's survival story and openly invites readers to choose between them. By so doing, this narrative strategy foregrounds epistemological uncertainty and reinforces the novel's thematic emphasis on belief over factual truth. The film preserves this ambiguity but renders it less verbally explicit. Through restrained dialogue and visual understatement, Ang Lee allows ambiguity to emerge emotionally rather than intellectually. Linda Hutcheon notes that "ambiguities may get reinterpreted and thus altered. to suit the medium rather than being reproduced exactly." (Hutcheon 86)

### **Adaptation as Creative Transformation**

What happens now in modern adaptation studies is the degree to which a film copies a book is no longer the norm. Instead, the film becomes a form of interpretation through the strengths and limitations inherent to one particular form over the other. Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* will clearly illustrate this point. How the film copies the book, will instead be interpreted through the strength of image, sound, and rhythm through the central themes found in the book.

The book relies on the use of the first-person narrative and self-analysis that promotes critical thinking and questioning the nature of the truth. In the film adaptation, the work relies on the use of imagination and visual stimulation. Using the power of pictures and sound, especially with the visualization of the sea and the tiger, the film relies on the use of imagination to produce spectacle. The issue of the nature of the truth seems to be emphasized but this time in an emotive manner and not cognitive.

### **Conclusion**

This comparative study reveals through *Life of Pi* how there are different techniques involved in storytelling, as stories are narrated in literature and cinema. While literature is based on language, imagination, and thoughts, cinema is based on images, sound, and emotions. Martel's literary work, *Life of Pi*, is based on language, imagination, and thoughts. This literary work is narrated through the first person, symbolism, and ambiguities, as it makes the reader think about religion, truth, and faith. There is active participation on the part of the readers as they try to make out Pi's story and what is reality. There is involvement of images, sound, and emotions on Ang Lee's part as he makes cinema based on images, sound, and emotions.

Furthermore, this research proves that movie adaptations cannot be measured solely based on their similarity to their book counterparts. Movie adaptations are in fact creative transformations in their own right. *Life of Pi* proves the possibility of adopting the themes of the book while modifying the story format in the movie version of it. Through comparisons based on structure, perspective, symbolism, and ambiguity, this research has been able to demonstrate the evolution of stories from one form of media to another.

### Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image–Music–Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, Fontana Press, 1977, pp. 142–148.
- Bluestone, George. *Novels into Film*. University of California Press, 1957.
- Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Cornell University Press, 1978.
- Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. Translated by Claudia Gorbman, Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2013.
- Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi*. Canongate Books, 2001.
- McFarlane, Brian. *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Stam, Robert. *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation*. Blackwell Publishing, 2005.