

THE EVOLUTION OF SYMBOLS: AN ANALYSIS OF *LIFE OF PI* THROUGH SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

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ABSTRACT

The paper delves into Ang Lee's film Life of Pi through the lens of symbolic interactionism, a sociological and psychological theory that suggests that individuals create and interpret symbols to give meaning to their social interactions and experiences. Symbols are the building blocks of human interaction. These can include words, gestures, objects, and other signs that have shared meanings. This paper tries to analyze the importance of these symbols, and how they helped in the survival of the protagonist Piscine Molitor Patel. This qualitative paper takes a symbolic approach to the text and tries to pose abstract ideas to uncover and interpret the ever-evolving symbols in the film Life Of Pi.

Keywords: Evolution of Symbols, *Life of Pi*, Symbolic Interactionism, The diary, The Tiger, The whistle.

INTRODUCTION

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory that focuses on how individuals create and interpret symbols by interacting with others and how these symbols construct their reality. For example, a handshake, it is a symbol that implies mutual respect and greeting. A strong handshake implies the confidence of a person and a weak one the opposite. This paper uses this micro level theory of social construction to identify and explain the symbols that lead to the decisions the protagonist made in the film *Life of Pi*.

In Ang Lee's *Life of Pi*, the protagonist Piscine Molitor Patel is stranded on a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker after the ship containing his family, other sailors and hundreds of zoo animals sank down in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He spent 227 days stuck on this lifeboat. This is a castaway story that takes us on a physical and a spiritual journey.

The following are the symbols that are prominently highlighted in the movie.

The Divine

One thing that makes Piscine different from most humans is his complex belief in 3 different religions which are Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. It is known as religious syncretism. "Religious syncretism involves the harmonious fusion of multiple religious ideologies, rituals, and customs into a distinct, unified belief system. This often transpires as diverse cultures come into contact and adopt aspects from one another" (Paschal, ch-12).

Even though the mix of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam seems odd, it is not at all something that is very unlikely to happen, as all of the three religions have identical frameworks of what is good and evil. And

adding to that, his geographical reality catered to his interest in religion. "None of us knows God until someone introduces us. I was first introduced to God as a Hindu" (*Life of Pi*, 12:41). These lines clearly show that he views God as something divine and beyond the grasp of religion. It is commonly said that religions are like several hikers trekking up the same mountain all at different points along the way, but all leading toward the same summit and in Pi's case it is very true.

God is first used as a symbol of wonder and understanding by the protagonist. "But this son (of God, Jesus), I couldn't get him out of my head" (*Life of Pi*, 17:27). This wonder was killed when his father, in an attempt to prove that animals do not have souls, fed Richard Parker a lamb in front of him. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in his book *Flight to Arras* said that, "A single event can awaken within us a stranger totally unknown to us. To live is to be slowly born." Meaning in this context, that when our interpretation of a particular symbol dies we find a different meaning for it. That is how symbols evolve overtime, by the death of the previously assigned meaning that we give to them. Then before the ship sank and the deadly storm was about to do what it had to, Piscine Molitor came out to see the lightning, the rain and the fierce waves. Rather than being frightened by it, he was filled with joy calling out to God for more rain.

“More rain! More rain! Lord of Storms!” (*Life of Pi*, 37:57) In this scene God or rather the Divine is used as a symbol for challenge and enthusiasm.

Later in the lifeboat when he and Richard Parker both are stuck in a deadly storm, similar to the first one. He treats it in the same way, provoking and praising the Lord of Storms. He forces Richard Parker to see the storm saying that God has come to meet them. Soon he realizes that the storm he has been viewing with awe, is the same storm that is terrifying his primale friend. That results in him losing all hope and saying “Why are you scaring him”. “I’ve lost my family. I’ve lost everything! I surrender! What more do you want?” (*Life of Pi*, 01:28:40). In this part of the film God is shown as a symbol of complete surrender.

The Tiger

The tiger is the most prominent symbol in the movie. It exists, not only in a physical form but also as an acute representation of Pi’s unconscious mind. When Pi decides to fish for it, to not let it go hungry, he is in turn ensuring his own survival. When Pi decides to befriend the tiger, he is trying to make amends with his own fears. Richard Parker forced him to confront the primal and instinctual aspects of his own psyche. Pi evolved from a boy who was a vegetarian to the heart, into a man who fights a tiger for a fish, for his own survival.

As a young boy Pi always believed that animals had souls and he believed those souls to be lord Vishnu “Animals have souls, I have seen it in their eyes” (*Life of Pi*, 23:43). Later this belief was shattered by his father who fed their tiger a lamb in front of him. This was shown as an intricate part of Pi’s development as it changed his view of life completely. “Things changed, after the day of Papa’s lesson. The world had lost some of its enchantment. School was a bore, nothing but facts, fractions and French” (*Life of Pi*, 26:05).

The next time he saw Richard Parker was in the lifeboat. This time he knew it to be just a dangerous carnivore who would do anything to survive. Now, the symbol of the tiger changed from animal-human harmony and to a symbol of fear and danger. This symbol was changed because of the interaction he had with his father, where they symbolically negotiated and decided the animal to be harmful. This interaction, like many others that are discussed in the paper, implies that symbols are negotiated by a person

with his environment and that these symbols are not imposed.

Soon, he realized that for him to survive on the lifeboat, he would have to establish an alpha-omega relationship with the tiger (Pendery, 3). This he does with great patience. He tries several methods, with the help of a cane and a whistle, to form this relationship. First, he used them to scare the animal, then to command it and finally he used the cane to feed it. This makes the tiger trust him as Pi is the only one on the boat who can fish effectively in the middle of the sea. This forms a companionship and a sense of respect between the two. In this part Richard Parker, the Bengal tiger is shown as a symbol of companionship and survival. As this paper discusses earlier Richard Parker is the most obvious symbol in the film. So, when they reach the Mexican shore, tired but undefeated. Richard Parker, gathering all the leftover courage in its body, jumps off the lifeboat and runs into the jungle. The fact that Pi was not able to say a final goodbye to Richard Parker, still evidently, hurts Pi. “At the edge of the jungle, he stopped. I was certain he was going to look back at me, flatten his ears to his head, growl - that he’d bring our relationship to an end in some way. But he just stared ahead into the jungle. And then Richard Parker, my fierce companion, the terrible one who kept me alive, disappeared forever from my life” (*Life of Pi*, 1:45:05).

This inability to get closure, forms a great regret in his heart, because if you see, Richard Parker was for him, what religion was for her mother. “her parents cut her (his mother) off because they thought she was marrying beneath her. Her religion was the only link she had to her past” (*Life of Pi*, 15:11). And as Richard Parker, who was the only one from Pi’s past that survived the ship-wreck, left without even giving Pi a final look, Pi’s philosophy that animals have souls is again disproven. “You know, I’ve left so much behind. My family, the zoo, Anandi, India - I suppose in the end the whole of life becomes an act of letting go. But what always hurts the most is not taking the moment to say goodbye. (*Life of pi*, 1:46:45)

CONCLUSION

The exploration of symbols and their evolution over time is one of the most fascinating journeys into the human mind and Ang Lee’s *Life of Pi* is a narrative that dives deep into the human psyche while challenging the permanence of symbols.

Symbols are building blocks of a society. They are not static, rather they are dynamic and subject to interpretation, negotiation and transformation. The paper discusses the evolution of symbols through the journey of Pi, whether it be spiritual or physical. As Pi tries to survive in the unpredictable sea, the story unfolds a plethora of symbols that keeps changing. Mainly this paper discusses the essential role that the symbols revolving around religion and Richard Parker play in the narrative and how through the evolution of those symbols Pi

survives.

The paper, with the help of Ang Lee's film *Life of Pi*, proves that symbols evolve over time and that they are negotiated, not imposed. This paper also tries to argue that the death of a meaning we give to a symbol, results in the evolution of that particular symbol and although the meaning might change the object of the symbol stays intact.

Life of Pi is truly one of the boldest stories ever told and as Barack Obama once wrote in his letter to Yann Martel, it is an "elegant proof of God".

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