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Metaphors and the Integration of Faith and Reason in Ang Lee's *Life of Pi*

Li Chunyi

Abstract

The film *Life of Pi* narrates a fable about the relationship between an individual and the mind-body realm, based on the transformative journey of an Indian boy, Piscine Patel, who found himself in a tumultuous battle between hope and despair, faith and reason, as he navigated the vast, unforgiving expanse of the open sea after a harrowing shipwreck. Once deeply rooted in his religious beliefs, Piscine began to lose faith in his objects of devotion. In his despair, he heeded his father's teachings, ingrained deep within his heart, and began to struggle for survival at sea using reason. When the external environment dampened Piscine's will to survive, the illusions of faith provided him with spiritual support, allowing him to rekindle his rational thinking and confront the challenges ahead. Throughout his arduous drift at sea, Piscine was accompanied by a fierce tiger, symbolizing the raw power of rationality, and a delicate lotus, embodying the essence of pure faith. Together, these symbolic representations serve as a poignant metaphor for integrating faith and reason in a state of perpetual flux, highlighting the intricate dynamics between faith and reason in the face of uncertainty.

Keywords: Faith, Reason, Hinduism, Metaphor, Integration.

Introduction

In the context of global migration and interactions between different cultures, a growing trend exists to examine values, ethics, and culture from a global, cross-cultural perspective that extends beyond localized cultural viewpoints. Against this backdrop of heightened cross-cultural engagement, the novel *Life of Pi* was written and later adapted into a film. Yann Martel, the author, has a background characterized by diverse cultural influences. He was born in Spain to white parents from the French-speaking region of Quebec, Canada. During his youth, Martel travelled extensively across Spain, France, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the United States. Despite his native language being French, Martel chooses English for his literary works. In 2001, Yann Martel published his novel *Life of Pi*, which remained a bestseller for years and earned him the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2002.

About a decade later, director Ang Lee adapted the novel into a cross-cultural 3D film that premiered in 2012. Born in Taiwan, Ang Lee considers himself a 'Waishengren,' a term used in Taiwan to refer to those who migrated to Taiwan from mainland China. With his educational and working experiences in the United States, Ang Lee has produced films reflecting both Eastern cultural elements, as seen in *Eat Drink Man Woman* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, as well as Western cultures and values, as evidenced in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Brokeback Mountain*. etc. Similarly, the story of *Life of Pi* is constructed within

the framework of Indian culture. The original novel's author and the film director of *Life of Pi*, having similar experiences living in a foreign country with different cultures, attempt to adopt a more open-minded attitude in their works. They aim to portray cultural diversity, express metaphorically the characters' inner confusions, and highlight the aspect of simplicity found in human nature that transcends cultural boundaries.

A Brief Introduction to the Story of the Film

Ang Lee utilizes a combination of virtual and realist approaches in directing his film *Life of Pi* to narrate an allegorical story. Piscine was born into a wealthy businessman's family in a former French-ruled territory in India. His father owned a zoo, while his mother worked as a botanist. From a young age, Piscine developed an intense fascination with religion. Under his mother's guidance and influence, he first embraced Hinduism. However, after learning about the Son of God in Christianity, Piscine became deeply drawn to Jesus. At night, Piscine expressed his gratitude to the Hindu deity Vishnu for introducing Jesus to him. He also found solace and peace in Arabic prayers as he began praying to Allah as a Muslim. Piscine simultaneously believed in all these religions but was also sceptical about them. Nonetheless, his scepticism did not diminish his loyalty to his faiths, as evidenced by Piscine's acknowledgement that "there are 33 million gods in Hindu religion... We get to feel guilty before hundreds of gods instead of just one" (Lee, 2012, 0:12:35-0:12:52).

Since Piscine reached the age of sixteen, his father's zoo business had encountered growing challenges due to regulatory issues. Consequently, his father decided to shut down the zoo and relocate with his family to Canada. The animals from the zoo were then transported on a cargo ship to Canada for sale. Tragically, on the fourth day of their voyage across the Pacific Ocean, the ship encountered a severe storm and sank. Piscine was the sole surviving person who managed to board a lifeboat, along with a wounded zebra, an orangutan, a hyena, and a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. After 227 days adrift at sea and encountering extraordinary events at sea, Piscine finally reached land and was rescued.

Piscine's Cradle of Faith and Reason

Piscine was born in Pondicherry, a former French colony in India. Pondicherry was a vibrant, splendid small town adorned with romantic and charming French architecture. The town featured a harmonious and beautiful scene accentuated by the elegant sarees worn by the ladies, a mysterious yet inviting ambience, and captivating Indian music. Under the management of Piscine's father as the director, the zoo portrayed an orderly world where animals lived contentedly according to established regulations, while lush trees and flowers flourished in abundance. This artificial animal world is as enchanting and affectionate as the Indian mythology that Piscine learns from his mother.

The film depicts Piscine's idealized early years by presenting contrasting scenes. Outside the window was a dark and chilly rainy night; inside the warm bedroom, young Piscine nestled close to his mother as she recounted stories from Hindu mythology that served as his first introduction to religion. In one of these tales told by his mother, he first encountered a Hindu deity named Krishna. According to the tale, baby Krishna once opened his mouth, revealing the entire universe in response to an accusation that he had eaten dirt – an ethereal representation conveying an innocent and authentic cosmic perspective. Before bedtime, Piscine would touch the sculpture of the sleeping deity Vishnu in their home and offer prayers as an expression of gratitude to Vishnu for introducing him to other gods. During religious festivals, Piscine and his brother Ravi watched their mother draw decorative rice motifs (Kolam/Rangoli) at the entrance of their house. Piscine's loving mother and her comforting

presence, combined with the ornamental rice pattern of the white lotus, established a reverent ambience that left a deep and pleasant impression on Piscine during his early years. In Hindu mythology, it is believed that a lotus flower bloomed from Vishnu's navel while he was asleep, and the god Brahma resided on this lotus flower. Obviously, the sacred symbolical significance of the lotus holds great importance in Hinduism. Within this spiritually rich setting filled with captivating narratives and symbolism, Piscine grows up in a happy and secure environment surrounded by love and tradition provided by his affluent yet rational businessman father and caring, tolerant mother.

While young Piscine viewed his hometown as a place of warmth, comfort, and beauty, he had yet to grasp the harsher side of reality, which was as relentless as the rainy night outside the window when his mother told him mythological stories. The orderly and well-managed zoo, overseen by his father, was filled with harmony and vitality, suggesting that it was an artificial construct rather than a real jungle. However, this artificial environment, designed to mimic natural wildlife habitats, could not replicate the brutality of life in an actual jungle.

In India, the practice of the caste system and discrimination against Dalits (lower castes) has detrimental impacts on the everyday lives of its citizens as well as the political and economic dynamics of society due to long-established customs (Yengde, 2009; Bayly, 1999). Piscine's mother, a college graduate from an upper-caste Indian family, married Piscine's father, who belonged to a lower caste. This resulted in a decline in her mother's caste status and estrangement from her maternal family. Hinduism became the sole connection between Piscine's mother and her past. She worked hard to preserve her ascribed caste status by maintaining the lifestyle habits of the higher caste, strengthening her belief in Hinduism, and practising vegetarianism. With support from the town council, Piscine's ambitious father established and managed a zoo; however, being from a lower caste background meant he did not have high social standing. As the town council gradually withdrew its backing for the zoo, his family's economic well-being was severely affected.

Unlike Piscine's mother, who led a devout religious life, Piscine's father consistently employed rational thinking in managing his life and running the zoo. He tried to teach Piscine to approach life's challenges with rationality and reason. When the innocent young Piscine attempted to get closer to a tiger by hand-feeding it, his father intervened by sacrificing a live goat, forcing Piscine to witness the brutal reality of the natural wildlife world. If not for his father's timely intervention, Piscine's naive actions would have resulted in him being torn apart and devoured by the tiger. This harsh lesson effectively guides Piscine towards confronting reality with logical reasoning rather than dwelling on idealistic faith-based fantasies.

In the film, it is essential to portray Piscine's idyllic childhood memories to establish the story's background. During family meals, Piscine's parents engaged in conversations about their differing religious views. His mother, a botanist, represents those who have faith and embrace religion, while his father, the zoo director, represents rational thinkers who follow secular principles and reason. Despite their contrasting perspectives, they respected and backed each other's beliefs, which ultimately contributed to Piscine's later reconciling faith with reason during his challenging drifting ordeal at sea.

For young Piscine, daily life is monotonous, disorderly, and seemingly endless, much like the mathematical constant Pi. Days without spiritual pursuit are meaningless to him. At the age of sixteen, Piscine met a young girl named Anandi in his music class. Anandi excelled in expressing her reverence and love for God through Indian dance with her dignified and graceful demeanour. Just like young Piscine, who believed that tigers also possessed human emotions, Anandi, proficient in rhythm and dance, personified the posture and demeanour of a

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crouching tiger that listened to the wind and rain in the mountains, subtly projecting her emotional imagination onto the fierce tiger. Like a blooming white lotus in the wild jungle, Anandi's dance becomes a pure and refreshing part of Piscine's monotonous and chaotic life. In short, Anandi embodies the purity of young Piscine's heart and becomes a manifestation of Piscine's inner innocence. However, Piscine and Anandi's romance abruptly ended when Piscine's father, after much rational deliberation, decided to shut down the zoo and immigrate to Canada to secure his family's future.

Rational Thinking and Reason as Survival Tools in Reality

When the shipwreck occurred, Piscine was pushed onto a small lifeboat by the sailors, and from that moment on, Piscine's world was turned upside down. According to Piscine's account, the animals that also made it onto the lifeboat were an injured zebra, a grieving orangutan who lost her child, a fierce hyena, and a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker.

Initially, while drifting at sea, Piscine maintained his belief in miracles and patiently hoped for his parents and brother to locate him. In the vast ocean, there were predatory fish, and within the lifeboat, there were fierce animals. Piscine faced a harsh environment full of peril but held fast to his faith without harming other creatures for sustenance. This forced him into a vulnerable position akin to a helpless child in the wild. As the struggle for survival on the lifeboat intensified and fatalities mounted, only Piscine and the tiger Richard Parker remained alive in their confined space. Through rational thinking, Piscine gradually established an orderly hierarchy of coexistence with the tiger, positioning himself as the master and Richard Parker as the subordinate to ensure their joint survival.

Following the brutal killings on the lifeboat, Piscine shifted from passively waiting for rescue to actively managing his battle for survival by establishing a rigorous daily routine. Despite being a vegetarian, Piscine reluctantly took up killing as a means of ensuring his survival. This presented a substantial challenge to his faith. Upon feeling ashamed and shedding tears after slaying a large Dorado fish, which was almost human-sized, he knelt in gratitude to Lord Vishnu for providing him with the strength to endure and survive.

On a serene and picturesque evening, a gigantic whale breached the surface of the sea, capsizing the fishing raft and causing fresh water and food to spill into the ocean. Shortly after that, a fierce storm struck again. Piscine grappled with distress, sorrow, apprehension, humiliation, isolation, rage, and profound desolation. He lost his will to survive, and the image of his mother, symbolizing beauty and the hope of life, gradually faded away. Even the once spirited and vigorous tiger, Richard Parker, was getting weaker in anticipation of their imminent death.

Metaphors and the Integration of Faith and Reason

After losing all his aspirations and hopes for survival, Piscine, consumed by hunger, succumbed to delirium. He envisioned an extraordinary and mystical island in this state of altered consciousness. Notably, with its tropical allure, this imaginary island holds metaphorical symbolism associated with Piscine's experiences during his harrowing ordeal at sea. The island serves as a representation of the carcass that Piscine consumes while in a delirious state. The trees on the island resemble mangroves commonly seen on tropical coastlines, featuring aerial roots that appear similar to blood vessels, and their wrist-like fruits are purplish-red in colour, reminiscent of coagulated blood. The island is home to small desert-dwelling creatures known as meerkats, which primarily prey on insects, lizards, snakes, spiders, plants, eggs and small mammals for sustenance. Like other members of the mongoose family, meerkats have

developed immunity to various toxins, which allows them to consume scorpions (including their stingers) and certain snakes without any adverse effects such as discomfort, poisoning, or death. On the densely populated island, they appear tightly packed together like maggots. Due to their inability to store fat in their bodies, meerkats on this island must hunt for food daily. Otherwise, they will starve to death -- a poignant symbol reflecting the enduring hunger felt throughout Piscine's drifting experience.

Interestingly, the metaphorical meanings of the tiger are multifaceted. Apart from symbolizing the raw power of rationality and reason, the tiger can be interpreted as a metaphor for hunger. According to Piscine's narrative as an adult, the fierce hyena embodies the cargo ship's chef with adept survival skills. The hyena preyed on the injured zebra that represents the sailor with broken legs, and used the zebra's flesh as bait. The orangutan represents Piscine's vegetarian mother, who disapproved of the hyena's actions and was also killed by the hyena and thrown into the sea to feed the sharks during their conflict at sea. To a certain extent, the tiger symbolizes the angry young Piscine who killed the hyena. Hence, the animal characters on the lifeboat, together with various flora and fauna and other substances found on the island, all carry specific metaphorical meanings and symbolism in this narrative.

In a similar vein, the humanoid island, which is depicted floating in the night sky in an eight-second-long shot, carries profound symbolic meanings on a spiritual level. In Hinduism, the depiction of a reclining figure on the sea is frequently portrayed, which seems to tally with the observation of Stella Kramrisch (1976) that the ground plan of Indian temples can be interpreted as resembling the reclining figure of a man. Temples are sacred places connecting gods and mortals and bear profound symbolic meaning encompassing various combinations of ideas and intentions (Michell, 1988; Harle, 1994). In Hindu mythology, after Shiva destroyed the universe, Vishnu fell asleep floating in the vast cosmic ocean from which human life is said to have originated through his dreams. While asleep, Vishnu gave birth to a lotus flower from his navel, upon which the four-headed Brahma sat. The pristine white lotus emerged gracefully from the muddy water, symbolizing the pure spirit detached from the impure body. Another mythological story about Brahma's birth and the universe's creation is linked to a golden egg resembling a closed lotus. The story describes how a seed was placed into the primordial waters, where it absorbed the essence of the ocean and eventually transformed into a golden egg containing all the energy. Brahma was born from the matured golden egg, and the remaining part of the egg expanded to become the universe (Mittal & Thursby, 2004). In the first version of the mythology about the birth of Brahma, the creator of the universe, Brahma was born from the lotus in Vishnu's navel. Interestingly enough, Piscine also opened a lotus on the fantasy island, symbolizing a seed of hope planted in the primordial waters. This reignites Piscine's will for survival and drives him to resume his rational approach to battling his drifting ordeal at sea.

The film depicts the lifeboat changing from new to old with an overgrown pitcher plant, symbolizing the helpless and extended period spent drifting. On the 227th day of drifting on the open sea, Piscine and the tiger Richard Parker finally reached the coast of Mexico, ending their long ordeal at sea. Exhausted, Piscine lay on the beach, feeling the warmth and solidity of the earth, while Richard Parker stretched his limbs and went ashore, entering the jungle alone. The symbolic representation of the tiger Richard Parker is complex and multifaceted. In the film, the tiger can symbolize hunger, anger, determination, reason, and vitality. Just as there was no farewell between Piscine and Anandi, Richard Parker also departed without bidding farewell to Piscine. However, symbolically speaking, the tiger continues to accompany Piscine in subsequent years after their ordeal ends. Director Ang Lee subtly selects an actor whose facial features and expressions resemble those of a tiger -- round eyes and penetrating gaze -- to play adult Piscine. Nevertheless, the adult Piscine still holds onto the world of pure faith,

just like his unwavering faith in gods to invoke reason to overcome hardship and challenges during his harrowing experience of being stranded at sea.

During his drifting ordeal at sea, Piscine completes the integration of faith and reason. He employs rational thought to navigate a world full of desires and regulations while preserving his deep-rooted faith. Unlike his younger self, Piscine now understands the symbolism of the lotus flower and the true essence of life in the real jungle. He is able to embrace the purity symbolized by the lotus within himself while acknowledging and accepting the robust, untamed vigour of his innate nature. In one scene from the film, there is an extended shot portraying a tranquil sea horizon with sunlight glistening on its surface, as well as a tiger's reflection on a white lifeboat in mid-ocean alongside a vulnerable boy standing on an orange raft nearby. Despite being physically apart, they are connected by a tether, creating an impression of unity between them - a subtle yet artistically crafted metaphor for integrating faith and reason.

In the Chinese classic novel "Dream of the Red Chamber," the protagonist, Jia Baoyu, also experiences the process of all hopes being shattered under rational social norms. Baoyu was once infatuated with the glamorous and luxurious life, and he eventually came to his awakening through gradual realization, in which every object of his infatuation was destroyed, making him feel his pain and the pain of others. As a result, Baoyu is able to break free from his infatuations and transcend the mundane world. The gradual awakening of Jia Baoyu, whose ideals and dreams are shattered, culminates in his renunciation of the secular world and his entry into monastic life.

Similarly, Piscine, the protagonist who shares experiences similar to those of Jia Baoyu, also undergoes a series of disillusionments. When the objects of Piscine's infatuation and belief are shattered one by one, he heeds the teachings of his father, hidden deep within his heart, and begins to face survival rationally. When the external environment brings him to the brink of despair, the illusion of faith provides him with spiritual support, enabling him to regain his rational thinking and confront hardships. The tiger, symbolizing rational vitality and struggle against adversity, and the lotus, symbolizing pure faith, have never left Piscine's side but accompany him spiritually and symbolically throughout the story. Piscine, who integrates his mind-body relationship through the ebb and flow of reason and faith, guides his life with reason and nurtures his soul with faith, striking a balance between temporal and spiritual life. Piscine's distant first love, Anandi, and his family members- his father, mother, and brother Ravi, whom he lost in the shipwreck- all return to Piscine in a different way. Rescued and reborn, Piscine establishes his own family on the other side of the ocean: an Indian wife skilled in cooking, a son named Ravi, an innocent daughter, and a cat. Most importantly, Piscine sheds his youthful immaturity and becomes a rational and peaceful middle-aged father. This is the Hollywood-style perfect ending that director Ang Lee provides for Piscine, who has suffered a series of losses throughout the ordeal.

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