

From the Perspective of Ecological Literary Criticism: An Analysis of *Life of Pi*

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Abstract: *Life of Pi* is a novel by Yann Malte that was adapted into a film of the same name by director Ang Lee. The work has attracted wide attention with its profound ecological themes. This paper will use the method of ecological literary criticism to explore and analyze this work, and study the changes in the relationship between man and nature involved in it, from the stage of anthropocentrism to the stage of confrontation and contradiction between man and nature, and then to the stage of harmonious coexistence and interdependence between man and nature, which is an ecological whole, and dig ecological value from it. It is beneficial to better view the relationship between man and nature and cultivate the heart of reverence for nature and the way of living in harmony with nature.

Keywords: ecological literary criticism, *Life of Pi*, man and nature, live in harmony

1. Introduction

Life of Pi, a work by Canadian author Yann Martel published in 2001, became a global bestseller upon its release and has been translated into over forty languages, enjoying widespread acclaim worldwide. It has won six international awards, including the Man Booker Prize and the German Book Prize, and is hailed as a contemporary classic.

Life of Pi tells the story of a 16-year-old Indian boy, *Pi*, and an adult Bengal tiger named Richard Parker, as they survive a 227-day ordeal in the Pacific Ocean. The novel holds significant research value, and numerous studies have been conducted on it, covering various aspects. However, most of these studies have focused on cultural perspectives, multimodal discourse analysis, film narrative strategies, and film subtitle translation. Li (2014) studied the film and novel translation strategies of *Life of Pi* from a cross-cultural perspective, using it as a case study to explore the theories and applications of film and novel translation. By combining cross-cultural communication theory with translation theory and practice, she interpreted the subtitle translation of *Life*

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of *Pi* and analyzed the translation strategies, aiming to provide some references for translation scholars. Zhong (2020) took *Life of Pi* as an example to study film subtitle translation from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis. Using multimodal discourse analysis as the entry point, he conducted a multi-level analysis of the film's subtitles, providing relevant references for translation workers. Wang (2021) analyzed the film narrative strategies of *Life of Pi* from three aspects: narrative levels, narrative structure, and narrators, hoping to provide some reference for the creation of subsequent films. Wang (2023) used *Life of Pi* as an example to study the relationship between literature and film and analyzed the similarities and differences between the literary work and the film in terms of character development, narrative style, social background presentation, character interaction, and artistic expression techniques. Through this analysis, one can understand the advantages of the two art forms and how they complement each other to present a complete story to the audience. However, studies from the perspective of ecological literary criticism on *Life of Pi* are rare. Therefore, this paper chooses to analyze the book from the perspective of ecological literary criticism, exploring the ecological ideas and the relationship between humans and nature involved, and uncovering its ecological value, which is conducive to better understanding the relationship between humans and nature and cultivating a sense of reverence for nature and a way of harmonious coexistence with it.

Since the First Industrial Revolution, humanity has entered the industrial age. The awareness and ability of humans to conquer and utilize nature have continuously increased. This has greatly improved the living conditions of humans and significantly enhanced their production and living standards. However, in this context, humans have constantly exploited nature, and the relationship between humans and nature has deteriorated. Environmental pollution, energy crises, and other issues have become increasingly prominent. The continuous destruction of the natural ecosystem by industrial civilization has led to frequent ecological crises. Against this backdrop, a green wave has swept through human society, and a new branch has emerged in the field of literary criticism, namely ecological literary criticism.

In 1972, Joseph Meeker proposed the concept of "literary ecology" in his book *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. In 1978, American scholar William Rueckert first introduced the concept of ecological criticism in his article essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. In 1993, the first National Conference on Ecocriticism was held in Colorado, USA. The rise of ecological literary criticism is a result of real-world development and an inherent need of humanity. Ecological literary criticism advocates that humanity must shift from a human-centered survival paradigm to an ecological-centered one. The critical target of ecological literature is not individuals or certain groups, but rather the anti-ecological civilization ideology and behavior. Its aim is to cultivate a sense of gratitude and reverence for nature and to build a harmonious and mutually beneficial relationship between humans and nature. Ecological literary criticism focuses on the relationship between literature and the natural physical environment, and is dedicated to uncovering ecological values within literary works. It provides a fresh perspective for in-depth reflection and a correct understanding of the relationship between

humans and nature.

This article chooses to analyze *Life of Pi* from the perspective of ecological literary criticism. By examining Pi's extraordinary journey, it explores the changes in the relationship between humans and nature depicted in the book, from a stage marked by anthropocentrism to one of mutual opposition and contradiction between humans and nature, and then to a stage of harmonious coexistence and interdependence, where humans and nature form an ecological whole. Uncovering the ecological values in this process helps us better understand the relationship between humans and nature and cultivate a sense of reverence for nature and a way to live in harmony with it.

2. Main Body

From the perspective of ecological literary criticism, the interpretation of *Life of Pi* can be roughly divided into three stages in terms of the changes in the relationship between humans and nature. The first stage is Pi's life in the local zoo in India, during which the relationship between humans and nature is characterized by anthropocentrism. The second stage is the initial hostile relationship between Pi and the Bengal tiger Richard Parker during their drift in the Pacific Ocean, where the relationship between humans and nature is opposition and contradiction. The third stage is when Pi and Richard Parker live in harmony and overcome difficulties together, during which the relationship between humans and nature is interdependence and coexistence.

2.1 The Anthropocentric Stage

The story of *Life of Pi* is set in a zoo managed by the local government in India during the 1950s and 1960s. The author describes this zoo from Pi's perspective, the first-person narrator. For Pi, it was a paradise on earth, leaving him with the most beautiful memories. He had vast, lush grounds to play in and countless species of wild animals to keep him company. The author uses a lot of words to describe the beauty of this zoo, including the lush grounds, the lions that served as Pi's childhood alarm clock, the kind gorillas that watched over him, birds of various colors, all kinds of cute little animals, and various majestic large animals, etc. When describing these scenes and animals, the author uses many words of praise, from which one can feel the protagonist Pi's love for nature, especially animals.

However, in this novel, one can sense a mainstream ideology shared by Pi and the vast majority of people at that time, that is, in the relationship between humans and nature, humans occupy the central and dominant position, which is the anthropocentric view. Pi believes that animals raised by humans have a much better living environment and conditions than those in the wild. Wild animals have very little food, constantly need to defend their territory, and always have to endure parasites. They are not free in terms of space, time, and individual relationships. But animals raised by humans in zoos do not have such troubles and do not have to go through these hardships.

Since the Industrial Revolution, humanity has entered the industrial age. Humans have continuously exploited natural resources for their own use, endlessly exploiting nature, and constantly conquering and transforming it. Thus, a modern civilization centered on humans has gradually formed. This modern civilization centered on humans believes that humans can

conquer, dominate, and control nature, viewing humans as the masters of nature, with plants and animals in nature dependent on human existence. Therefore, in the era when the story of *Life of Pi* takes place, people generally believed that the living environment and conditions of animals in zoos were much better than those in the wild. They did not have to face the problems of lack of food and shelter, nor did they have to worry about their lives. Pi grew up in such an environment, so it is inevitable that his ecological view is also influenced by anthropocentrism.

The beginning of *Life of Pi* describes Pi's love for nature, especially animals. Pi's father did indeed take good care of these animals, and they lived carefree lives in the zoo without the need to struggle for survival. However, this deprived them of their right to live freely. They could not run freely on the vast grasslands, have new adventures in the rainforest, or explore the wonders of life in the desert. They were trapped in one place because of humans' greed to visit animals, understand nature, and broaden their horizons. They lost the freedom that should have belonged to them. Therefore, although Pi loved animals very much and often had close contact with them, forming good relationship with them, in essence, his understanding and love for animals were based on anthropocentrism.

2.2 The Stage of Conflict and Contradiction

The second stage of *Life of Pi* tells the story of Pi being forced to embark on a solitary journey across the Pacific Ocean after the sinking of the Tsimtsum cruise ship due to a shipwreck. During his journey, he has a companion, a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. At the beginning, Pi is isolated and helpless on the lifeboat, with a tiger in front of him, a group of sharks behind, and surrounded by violent storms. He is particularly unaccustomed to the extreme and harsh natural environment. The author uses Pi's voice to describe the rapidly changing and unpredictable sea weather, the harsh survival environment, and the dangerous waves that can kill him at any time. In particular, it extensively describes the conflicts and contradictions between Pi and the natural environment and Richard Parker, reflecting the mutual opposition and contradiction between humans and nature.

When describing this stage, the author skillfully employs the metaphorical technique. The background of Pi's shipwreck is actually a metaphor for the global ecological crisis. The shipwreck symbolizes the survival crisis faced by humanity, while Pi and Richard Parker's drifting represents the coexistence and survival of humans and nature. This metaphor implies that humans need to re-examine their behavior, as the destruction of nature will ultimately endanger human survival. Additionally, there is another metaphorical technique, where Pi is metaphorically represented as humanity and Richard Parker as nature. Therefore, when describing the conflicts and contradictions between Pi and Richard Parker, it simultaneously alludes to and implies the contradictions and conflicts between humans and nature.

At the beginning, in the struggle between Richard Parker and Pi, Richard Parker holds the upper hand. Richard Parker drives the frightened and desperate Pi under the lifeboat, and Pi can only hide on a floating object made of oars and life jackets, waiting for a glimmer of hope. Pi uses a small raft made of random materials and connects it to the lifeboat occupied by Richard Parker. In this stage, Pi and Richard Parker are enemies to each other. Thus, it can be seen that the view of mutual opposition and

contradiction between humans and nature is presented in this stage.

In the early stage of Pi's interaction with Richard Parker, the mutual opposition and contradiction between humans and nature become even clearer. Pi is very afraid of Richard Parker, and this fear stems from Pi's fear of wild animals and also implies humanity's fear of nature. Pi is worried that he might become Richard Parker's food if he is not careful. On a long, cold, and dark night, Pi imagines a plan to completely get rid of Richard Parker and take sole possession of the lifeboat. The presence of Richard Parker keeps Pi in a state of worry and fear, tormenting his nerves; while Pi is secretly thinking of ways to get rid of Richard Parker. This clearly shows the mutual opposition and contradiction between humans and nature. Nature makes humans physically and mentally exhausted and fearful, while humans try to fight back against nature to protect themselves. The conflicts, oppositions, and contradictions between humans and nature are presented straightforwardly.

From the description of the plot between Pi and the natural environment, as well as the Bengal tiger Richard Parker, it can be seen that humans and nature are in a state of mutual opposition and contradiction. Richard Parker, as a representative of wild animals, symbolizes nature. Pi can be regarded as the representative of humanity. The two sides are in an adversarial state. On the one hand, nature constantly torments the human body and will; on the other hand, humans also bravely fight back against nature to protect themselves.

Before entering the third stage of harmonious coexistence and mutual dependence between Pi and Richard Parker, Pi attempts to make Richard Parker submit to him and become his master. For this purpose, Pi makes some efforts, but none of them succeed. Pi fails to tame Richard Parker. This indicates that Pi's thoughts at this time still have some human-centered tendencies, believing that he should tame Richard Parker. Just as humans should conquer nature and make it serve their purposes, the failure to do so indicates that nature is not simply there for humanity to subdue at will; it will retaliate. This well illustrates the mutual opposition and contradiction between humans and nature.

At this stage, Pi and Richard Parker are both in a highly tense state, filled with unease and fear. Such a state is not conducive to the survival and well-being of either party. Therefore, the mutual opposition and contradiction between humans and nature can have adverse effects on both sides, hindering their positive development.

2.3 The Stage of Interdependence and Ecological Holism

As time went by, Pi gradually adapted to the life of drifting at sea. When he couldn't get rid of Richard Parker or make Richard Parker submit to him, he chose to coexist with him and live in peace. He began to try fishing to feed Richard Parker to ensure his own safety. And Richard Parker didn't refuse his feeding, but he always maintained his own independence. During the long period of coexistence that followed, their relationship became increasingly harmonious. And Richard Parker didn't eat Pi either, and even left him enough living space. They formed a kind of tacit mutual dependence relationship.

On the boundless Pacific Ocean, Pi and Richard Parker lived interdependently and in harmony with each other, symbolizing the harmonious coexistence and mutual dependence between humans and nature. Their relationship became increasingly solid and

inseparable as they experienced numerous difficulties and dangers together in the Pacific Ocean. They lived in harmony, continuously overcoming one difficulty after another, and finally managed to reach the shore. In the end, Richard Parker left Pi far behind, and Pi showed extreme reluctance and gratitude towards him. This was not only a sign of reluctance and gratitude towards Richard Parker, but also an expression of gratitude towards nature. The peaceful coexistence and tacit cooperation between Pi and Richard Parker, as well as their relationship with each other, made their lives more beautiful. This shows that humans and nature are interdependent and live in harmony at this stage.

The author emphasized the idea of ecological holism through the relationship between Pi and Richard Parker. Ecological holism holds that a system should be regarded as a whole, and humans are only a part of it. Humans must respect the survival rights of other creatures and help maintain ecological balance. In the novel *Life of Pi*, the changes in the relationship between Pi and Richard Parker are an embodiment of this ecological holism view. They gradually developed from an adversarial relationship to a mutually dependent one, and finally reached a state of harmonious coexistence and mutual dependence. This is also the ideal state of harmonious symbiosis between humans and nature that ecological holism pursues. Humans and nature are an ecological whole, and they should be interdependent and live in harmony. Only in this way can both sides of humans and nature achieve better development and form a virtuous cycle.

3. Conclusion

In the work *Life of Pi*, Canadian author Yann Martel first elaborately described Pi's observations, experiences and thoughts while he was governing a local zoo in India. This portrayal presented us with a zoo full of vitality and vigor, captivating our imagination and making us yearn to get closer to nature. However, this also reflected the common viewpoint of that time, which was that in the relationship between humans and nature, there was a tendency towards anthropocentrism. It was believed that the animals raised by humans in the zoo should have better living environments and conditions than those of wild animals in nature. The second stage described Pi's initial drifting journey with the Bengal tiger Richard Parker in the Pacific Ocean. The relationship between Pi and Richard Parker was initially highly tense, viewing each other as enemies. The author used metaphorical techniques to symbolize the relationship between Pi and Richard Parker as the relationship between humans and nature. From this, we can understand the mutual contradiction and opposition between humans and nature in this stage. As Pi gradually adapted to the drifting life at sea, the relationship between Pi and Richard Parker also gradually eased, even forming a harmonious tacit understanding. This reflects the harmonious and interdependent relationship between humans and nature. In this novel *Life of Pi*, the author conveys ecological thoughts of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, respecting nature and protecting the ecosystem through profound ecological themes. This thought has significant implications for understanding ecological literature, reflecting on human behavior, and protecting the ecological environment. At the same time, this work also reminds humans that when facing global ecological crises, humans need to re-examine their behaviors and seek a way of harmonious coexistence with nature.

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