

First-Person Narration in *Life of Pi*

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Abstract

Life of Pi is the masterpiece of Canadian writer Yann Martel (1963-). Since it was published, the book has been warmly received by the audience, and is on the list of the most popular world classics. Its huge success is closely connected with the unique narrative techniques Yann Martel employs. This paper tends to explore its homodiegetic first person narration. Specifically, the hero/narrator Pi in the intradiegetic level recalls the shipwreck he goes through many years later, in particular how he survives the accident; while a mask narrator in the extradiegetic level supplements and verifies intradiegetic narrative, and guides readers to make their own judgment and take proper ethical position. As a whole, inside *Life of Pi* there are two opposing tendencies: one is the realistic portrayal of the testing voyage after the shipwreck; the other is the apparent uncertainty as the telling of the story is constantly subverted and denarrated. Thus a tension is created, and the whole work has a fantastic and surreal coloring. These two opposing and contradictory tendencies, I believe, are related to Martel's aesthetic ideas: the top priority for an artist is not the actuality of a story but the imagination and life within.

Key words: First person; Levels; Mode of narration; Tension; *Life of Pi*

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INTRODUCTION

In 2002, Canadian writer Yann Martel won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction because of his imaginative work *Life of Pi*. In 2012 it was adapted into a film directed by Chinese director Ang Lee, and has enjoyed a high reputation. Known as a touching adventure story, the novel falls into three parts, and each part corresponds to a different place. In the first part (Chapter 1 to 36), our hero Piscine Molitor Patel (known as Pi) reminisces about his childhood in Pondicherry, India, including his education and religious beliefs. Without many ups and downs, the beginning part can be said to be the foreshadowing of the whole book. In part two (Chapter 37 to 94), the main body of the work, Pi recounts various hardships he encounters during the 227-day voyage across the Pacific. Pi's family decide to leave for North America, so they pack their belongings as well as some animals from the zoo they keep and board a Japanese cargo ship called the *Tsimtsum*. But the ship sinks, and everybody dies but Pi. He is stranded alone with a zebra, an orang-utan, a hyena, and a 450-pound Royal Bengal tiger named Richardo Parker on the lifeboat. Later, the hyena kills the zebra and orang-utan, and Richardo Parker kills the hyena. Luckily, he survives because of his strong vitality and firm religious faith. Part three (Chapter 95 to 100) revolves on the investigation carried out by a few officials from Japanese Ministry of Transport after Pi is saved. The officials have doubt about the credibility of the account, and question him successively. Pi, consequently, tells another version of the story, much bloodier and more ruthless, which reveals the darkness and cruelty of humanity. Part three is relatively short, yet its significance can not be underestimated for it triggers further reflection upon the whole story.

Yann Martel uses a unique perspective in the book, the first-person embedded narration with minor changes. Gerard Genette gives a definition of narrative levels in his *Narrative Discourse*:

...any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed... a literary act carried out at a first level, which we will call extradiegetic; the events told ... inside this first narrative, so we will describe them as diegetic, or intradiegetic. (p.228)

Extradiegetic narration can also be called frame narration; while the intradiegetic narration be called embedded narration. Frame narrative usually provides background and narrator for the embedded narration.

1. ONE POLE OF REALISTIC PORTRAYAL

The frame narrative of the book is the beginning of the homodiegetic narration. In Author's Note, the extradiegetic narrator introduces the origin of the work: he feels depressed due to the unpopularity of his first book, he then travels about trying to find some clues about his second book. At that time, a man named Francis Adirubasamy comes up to him and suggests that he should listen to Pi's story, because it will make people believe in God. So the narrator sets out to look for the hero, and thus introduces the embedded narrative told by Pi. Typically, once the embedded narration starts, the frame narration disappears. But *Life of Pi* is different, even after the beginning of the embedded narrative, the extradiegetic narrator continues to show up and offer readers additional information frequently such as several interviews with Pi, his analytical and objective observation about Pi, etc. This kind of interpolations seem random, but actually echo with the embedded narration level, and form mutual reference. For instance, before Pi tells about his multiple religious faiths, we see in Pi's apartment different icons and shrines. Another example is that before the narration of the exciting adventure on the sea ever starts, the extradiegetic narrator tells us that Pi many years after the tragic accident enjoys happy family life and affirms us "this story has a happy ending" (p.117). Of course readers know Pi has survived, and their main interest lies in what happened and how things happened. Unfolding the story at two levels at the same time, in other words, the juxtaposition and the echoes between these two levels slow down the rhythm of the narration, and form a sharp contrast to the exciting drifting on the sea in part two. And readers have gained a new experience: to move back and forth between the two levels yet march ahead at the same time. In this way, the novel's first part is split into a series of episodes in two different levels and the pieces are then put together, and form a metaphorical spatial correspondence. Thus part one has the feature of a picture, a spatial effect of simultaneity.

The extradiegetic narrator obviously is somewhat autobiographical, and in Author's Note there are some personal experience of Yann Martel himself. But he is

definitely not Yann Martel the real writer. All the time the undramatized narrator functions as a calm and objective recorder of events, his background and personality remain unknown. He is quite discrete on revealing his attitudes, values and position, and he seldom makes direct commentary toward Pi's story and Pi the character. His character is not fully developed, vague and flat; his behaviors don't constitute the main content of the story. Gradually, the extradiegetic narrator vanishes and his voice weakens. Specifically, the voice of the extradiegetic narrator in Author's Note is pervasive and dominant. But in part one, Pi takes his place and tells some anecdotes in the course of his growth and the subsequent shipwreck. Pi's voice becomes dominant, while the extradiegetic narrator just observes Pi from the outside, hides his position and his narration occupies a mere fraction of this part. When Pi is telling us about his adventure on the ocean, which is the climax of the novel, the extradiegetic narrator disappears completely. In the third part, he reappears, and tells about the investigation on the accident and its final outcome at the end of the novel.

Genette maintains that a narrator has narrating, directing, communication, attestation, and ideological functions. In *Life of Pi*, the major role of the first-person narrator at the extradiegetic level is to attest. His calm and objective attitude, his neutral position, his introduction of the origin of the story, and the provision of the investigation report, all confirm the validity and credibility of the story. Second, he offers supplement to the embedded narration. Due to the limitation of the first-person perspective, Pi, the narrator of the embedded narration is unlikely to make observation about himself from the outside. The extradiegetic narrator observes carefully the way Pi dresses himself, the way he speaks, his facial expression, and the details of his life, and thus creates a more complete, vivid image of Pi. The narrator considers Pi knowledgeable and logical, "His spice rack looks like an apothecary's shop. When he opens his refrigerator or his cupboards, there are many brand names I don't recognize; in fact I can't even tell what languages they're in." (P. 31) These detailed descriptions provide to some degree evidence about Pi's qualification as narrator. Another important supplement is the Japanese officials' investigation of the shipwreck and their final conclusion. Through these strategies, the extradiegetic narrator has secret communication with the authorial reader, works as mask of Yann Martel, and reveals implicitly the values and judgment held by the implied author. The narrator is a visible image of implied author and guides readers to react and form judgment of their own on the story told, and grasp the theme of the work: the importance of faith in human life.

Like many conventional bildungsroman novels, first-person narration is used in the embedded narration in *Life*

of *Pi*. In Author's Note, the narrator explains "It seemed natural that Mr. Patel's story should be told mostly in the first person—in his voice and through his eyes." (p.xi) Obviously, the mode of narration is not randomly picked, but rather designed meticulously to achieve aesthetic effect. First-person narration has obvious emotional appeal, with artistic power and sense of reality. Readers see Pi's growth, experience his harsh circumstances and understand his thoughts and sentiments. The first-person narration also brings the narrator and reader closer and creates an intimate connection between narrator and readers. Readers would put themselves in the position of a sympathetic listener rather than a pure onlooker, take part in the communication, feel and sense Pi's subtle thought and fluctuation of mood. Some critics claim that part one occupies too much space, with rather slow rhythm, so readers need enormous patience to finish reading it. In sharp contrast to the exciting drifting in the second part, I think, part one is prosaic, yet it lays the groundwork for the rest of the work and a bond is established between the reader and Pi.

2. THE OTHER POLE OF DENARRATION AND UNCERTAINTY

While the extradiegetic narrator can be seen as surrogate or agent of the implied author, the distance between implied author and Pi, narrator in the embedded narrator is far more complicated. Pi experiences life and death ordeal after he lost all beloved ones in the shipwreck. This has become the trauma in the depth of his heart. He wishes desperately to tell the story, and can't help feeling anxious in the course of narrating. The story told by Pi is dream-like yet real. It sets multiple barriers between reader and text through the tension of narration and creates ambiguity and uncertainty on purpose. Compared to third-person narration, first-person narration is more flexible in structure, and involves both narrating self and experiencing self. First-person retrospective perspective, the narrating self, is extensively used in *Life of Pi*. Even if in some cases the narration temporarily switches to experiencing perspective in order to create certain rhetorical effects, it will switch back to narrating self soon. The contrast between perspectives of Pi as children and adult generates peculiar tension, and when they both coexist in the text, dual focalization is produced. One example in case is when Pi talks about the zoo his family keep: "It was a huge zoo, spread over numberless acres, big enough to require a train to explore it, though it seemed to get smaller as I grew older, train included. Now it's so small it fits in my head." (p.15) This sentence explicitly shows differences in perception between child and adult perspectives. Child perspective is used first, then is rectified immediately by the adult point of view. The huge zoo is nothing more than childish fantasy. There

are some paradoxical and denarrational expressions in the book. For example, when Pi fails to win the Governor General's Academic Medal in spite of his outstanding academic performance, he said: "I still smart a little at the slight. When you've suffered a great deal in life, each additional pain is both unbearable and trifling." (p.6) These sentences not only fail to clarify the events narrated, but also cause confusion and vagueness. With the unfolding of the story, uncertainty keeps piling up. The story is constantly subverted, challenged and become less reliable.

In the second part, this uncertainty escalates further. Readers feel as if they were present at the scene and experienced the fear, helplessness, loneliness Pi went through during the breathtaking adventure. Pi learns gradually how to deal with danger and becomes a total different man. Just to stay alive, he changes from a person who loves animals, treats them well and likes watching them into a savage who skillfully hunts sea turtles and eats raw meat. In this part, the experiencing point of view has replaced retrospective, because the first person experiencing point of view is more vivid, and tends to arouse sympathy and cause suspense. In some cases, Pi takes advantage of experiencing perspective and deliberately misleads readers. For instance, at first Pi misinforms readers that Richardo is not on the lifeboat, and this is a logical scientific inference based on his long time observation on animals. Then he makes correction and guesses that Richardo is seasick. Readers have to follow and withdraw their previous judgments. In particular, there is an unbelievable coincidence in the story: Pi is blind and exhausted after days of drifting in the Pacific, he meets another survivor by chance. Pi says after he hears a voice: "I knew it. I wasn't hearing voices. I hadn't gone mad. It was Richard Parker who was speaking to me!" (p.310) Later he makes corrections and tells us the speaker is a Frenchman who is also blind and a victim of a shipwreck. Readers must find this incredible. Another example is Pi drifts to an island with carnivorous trees and lots of meerkats.

The uncertainty reaches the summit in part three. Mr. Tomohiro Okamoto and Mr. Atsuro Chiba from the Japanese Ministry of Transport are responsible for the investigation of the accident. They inquire every detail and question Pi thoroughly before providing a final report of the accident and a tape recording of their conversation. At the moment, the point of view changes for another time. The provision of the recording transcript basically equals third person objective perspective. In spite of all its strengths mentioned earlier, first person narration has a natural tendency to transform objective description into subjective statement; its subjectivity obviously rejects objective showing. Yann Martel notices its limitation, avoids its subjectivity by interpolating excerpts from the transcript. When Japanese officials come to investigate, they find the story unbelievable. Pi, therefore, tells another

version of what happened. This second story tells us that Pi, his mother, a sailor and a French cook make it to the lifeboat. Then sailor and Pi's mother are killed by the cook, Pi then avenges and kills the cook and becomes the only survivor. The two Japanese officials and many readers have discovered the correspondence between the two versions of story. The sailor matches the zebra; Pi's mother matches orang-utan; the cook matches hyena; Pi matches the tiger.

Generally speaking, the first half of the story is told with realism: Pi's reaction to the accident conforms to what people expect a sixteenth-year-old to do. With the progress of the narrative procedure, readers get increasingly confused and need to form their own judgment about the credibility of the adventure, whether it is a fiction just made-up to give it a surreal color, or it is merely because Pi can not tell illusion from reality after drifting at sea for a long time. The unsteadiness of interpretation increases gradually, readers seem to be trapped in the maze of literature, and enjoy the reading pleasure brought about by ambiguity and uncertainty at different levels.

3. AESTHETIC VALUES

Yann Martel seems to use the uncertainty hidden in the text to encourage readers to engage actively in the interpretation and understanding as they read. Telling another version of what happened seems to have denarrated the story told in the first place, but the denarration is temporary. Once the narratee is identified with Pi's ethic values, they will move back to the story told in the first place. The second version is denarrated shortly after it is told. Actually, the implied author is not just an onlooker, but offers us clues for our understating, and guides readers' reaction and judgment. First the mask narrator reveals implicitly the values and judgment of the implied author. After reading Pi's story, he determines to replace it with his original work, which undoubtedly shows he thinks Pi's story is superior, more vigorous and not just "dry yeastless factuality" (p.381). The distribution of the two stories, also shows he is more infatuated with the first, thinks it more believable. In Author's Note, one year after the recording of the story, the narrator receives a tape and a report sent from the Japanese Ministry of Transport, and then affirms the opinion that this story can make people believe in God. Actually, he is the person who has most inclusive information about the whole story with reports and documents, and his interpretation and attitude toward the story are absolutely convincing. The implied author hints that we take the same position as the extradiegetic narrator. Second, Yann Martel has designed several other narratees whose attitude and reaction also reveal the author's position. In the beginning, Japanese officials refuse to accept Pi's story, and constantly question its credibility, yet each time Pi refutes them

with valid arguments. Pi turns from the questioned to the persuader. After listening to the second story, the officials are horrified by the bloodiness and cruelty, and they both consider the first story superior. They have changed from doubt to belief with reservation. This transformation in attitude makes us closer to Pi's ethical positioning. Third, readers already know that Pi survives the adventure and has a happy family life now. Pi has withstood the ordeal of faiths, and found the truth meaning of life. From such arrangements of the fate of character, readers can see implied author's identification and approval, thus ascertain their own ethical positioning.

Clearly, we can see there are two opposing tendencies in the narration of *Life of Pi*: One is the description of how the protagonist survives this tragic event, the other is the obvious uncertainty in the book as the narration is constantly challenged, and denarrated, thus forming a unique tension of narration. Because Martel's purpose of creating this book is not telling what happen to Pi exactly, the credibility of the story is not his top priority. As the sole survivor of the accident, Pi's narration is the most convincing source of the accident, but in the meantime poses doubt. Japanese officials say: "We want the 'straight facts'." To this Pi replies: "Isn't telling about something—using words, English or Japanese—already something of an invention? Isn't just looking upon this world already something of an invention?" (p.380) Pi's opinion echoes with what the extradiegetic narrator believes in Author's Note: "That's what fiction is about, isn't it, the selective transforming of reality? The twisting of it to bring out its essence?" (p.vi) This kind of commentary not only self-referentially exposes the fictionality of the text, but also reminds readers that this is a work of literary creation, rather than the exact documentation of the original event. These two contradictory tendencies are closely linked to the author's aesthetic ideas: the novelist's foremost concern should not be the credibility of the story, but the imagination and vigor within. The extradiegetic narrator is unsatisfied with his former works because "An element is missing, that spark that brings to life a real story, regardless of whether the history or the food is right. Your story is emotionally dead, that's the crux of it." (p.vii) Vitality and sentiments, are considered the essence of literary creation. During an interview, Yann Martel expressed the same opinion. In his opinion, reading a novel is like believing in God, readers should be completely dedicated and let go doubt in your heart.

CONCLUSION

In the context of postmodernism, Jacques Derrida, representative of deconstruction believes that since the ultimate meaning of text no long exists, signifiers have enormous potential of ambiguity and the difference

of signs in language makes text an open system. Yann Martel, born in 20th century, certainly receives the impact of the theory. In *Life of Pi*, through the switch of point of view, a surreal yet real story is created. The boundary between reality and fantasy is vague and equivocal, and the ambiguity and uncertainty require readers to make their own judgment and interpretation. It seems there is only a thin line between what is true and false, reality and fantasy within the fictional world of *Life of Pi*.

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