

TOWARDS NEW AESTHETICS AND THEMES: CRITICAL ANIMAL STUDIES AND FICTION

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Abstract

Critical Animal Studies (CAS) is a recent advance in the field of interdisciplinary studies and humanities. It is a revision of Animal Studies and focuses on animality, animalization, and representation of animals in literature and culture. Critical Animal Studies draw upon multidisciplinary research to generate new ways of perceiving animals and human-animal relationships. One of the focal areas of CAS is the ethical reflection on the relationship between human beings and animals. This discipline also reflects on trans-species intersectionality, animal identities, animal subjectivity, deconstruction of the human-animal binary, radical politics promoting animal liberation, and construction of dialogues with various academic groups.

This paper explains how Critical Animal Studies provide a new approach to reading literary texts by focusing on the structural, institutional, and discursive aspects of power that affect animals. It also focuses on animal-centred reading aspects that touch upon fauna criticism, representation of animals, intersectional social justice, the animal standpoint, and the principle of total liberation. This paper also analyses Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* in the light of Critical Animal Studies to highlight the recent advances in Humanities.

Key words: Animal Studies, Critical Animal Studies, ethics, speciesism

Critical Animal Studies (CAS), like Animal Studies, is an interdisciplinary field, but its main focus is on theory to activism. In 2001 Anthony J. Nocella and Steven Best established the Centre for Animal Liberation Affairs, which was renamed as the Institute for Critical Animal Studies in 2007. The key concerns of CAS are trans-species intersectionality, social equity, ethical treatment, environmental justice and the political movement. It is an amalgamation of academic research in various fields and political activism needed for the protection of animals.

CAS promotes collaborative work from different fields to impart a greater, in-depth, and comprehensive understanding of the human-animal relationship. It also probes further and questions academic research for its emphasis on pseudo-objectivity, jargon-filled language, elitist theories and lack of political activism. It supports theoretical research but only as a starting point for political action. Intersectionality is one of the main features of CAS as it shows how different types of oppression in society, as for example, sexism, speciesism, racism, ableism, and ageism have common roots and ideologies that contribute to a greater system of dominance, control, violence, commodification, standardization, capitalization, and normalcy. CAS, in general, is a movement against any type of oppression as it believes that all types of oppression are fundamentally entangled. It questions and deconstructs mad-made, hierarchical, and anthropocentric binaries, dismantling the very base of global domination, which promotes and maintains an interlocking global system of exploitation. By doing so CAS has also negated the

criticism of animal rights activists that they waste time and resources by focusing on the animal suffering instead of working for the betterment of human beings. Moreover, it fills the gap between the theories propounded by Animal Studies and on ground activism by animal rights activists. CAS looks at animals as subjects with agency and personhood and advocates the total liberation of animals. It proposes a nonhuman standpoint, which may not be fully understood by human beings but yet it has to be acknowledged. It also promotes ethical veganism to stop the institutionalised murder of animals in slaughterhouses. It states that veganism is not just a personal choice of food, but a type of political activism against the commercial forces which benefit from inflicting cruelty on animals. It is a symbolic expression of support for the animal rights movement and a commitment towards reducing animal suffering. CAS argues for uncomplicated, clear, and straightforward legal acts for animal liberation which cannot be misinterpreted and misused by the commercial forces of capitalist societies. However, CAS does not promote single-issue activism. It works against all sorts of oppressive social systems and advocates Alliance Politics for the total liberation of humans, non-humans and the Earth.

The groundbreaking work done by Animal Studies and Critical Animal Studies gave rise to the animal turn in academic research and it manifested in the outburst of many books, articles, journals, and research papers covering the topics of animal rights, animal subjectivity, animal standpoint, vegetarianism, and veganism. Though animals always found a prominent place in fables, fantasy and children's literature, now they carry their own personality with a separate identity and agency in new age literature. Mario Ortiz-Robles in his provocative book *Literature and Animal Studies* maintains that literature is nothing but an attempt of human beings to represent animals. Further, he suggests that such animal-centric literature contributes to Animal Studies as it shows that there is something fictional about the relationship between humans and animals as we can just imagine what animals think and feel.

The Late 20th and 21st centuries have witnessed the explosion of animal-centric theories depicting animal agency and animal personhood, as for example, Richard Ryders's *Speciesism, Painism and Happiness* (2011), Rob Boddice's *Anthropocentrism* (2011), Anna Barcz's *Animal Narratives and Culture* (2017), Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (2002), Jacques Derrida's *The Animal that Therefore I Am* (2008), Marc Fellenz's *The Moral Menagerie: Philosophy and Animal Rights* (2007), Seyla Benhabib's *The Rights of Others* (2004), Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert's *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places* (2000), and Carol Adams' *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (2015). With the advancement of non-anthropocentric theories, the representation of animals in literature became less anthropomorphic. They started to appear with their own complex personalities leaving gaps, aporia, space, and challenges for the interpretation of their feelings and emotions. They communicate their resistance through their gaze, behavioural patterns, and tone for the social, political, environmental, and ethical injustice inflicted on them. Many novels published in 21st century present animals as strange beings, difficult to understand or comprehend. Some novelists give a voice to animals unheard by the novel's human characters. It shows the obvious paradox of how human beings think about animals and what animals feel as a matter of fact, as for example, Mara, a kitten, in *The Wildings* by Nilanjana Roy, doesn't approve of some affectionate gestures of her human owners. However, some novelists have tried to maintain the age-old tradition of showcasing human-animal bonding. For example, Hedwig, an owl, and Harry Potter in J. K. Rowlings *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, share a bonding of love and mutual understanding. Irrespective of the type of genre,

realist or fabulist, contemporary novelists have espoused the non-speciesist standpoint in varying degrees.

Life of Pi, published in 2001, is an adventure and philosophical novel by a Canadian novelist, Yann Martel. The story is about Piscine Molitor "Pi" Patel, who survives a shipwreck and spends 227 days on a lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean with a ferocious, full-grown Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. It is an animal-centred narrative. The very first paragraph of the novel, indirectly, introduces animal-assisted therapy (AAT) when Pi chooses a three-toed sloth as a research subject for his zoology thesis because he is convinced that the calm, quiet and introspective demeanour of the sloth has helped to pacify his disturbed self. Moreover, Pi maintains that sloths live in complete harmony with the environment as it doesn't make much noise, and follow a vegetarian diet. Though Pi investigates the sloth's lifestyle, he accepts that human beings cannot understand animal behaviour in totality. They can only use anthropomorphism to try to decode animal behaviour: "... I felt I was in the presence of upside-down yogis deep in meditation or hermits deep in prayer, wise beings whose intense imaginative lives were beyond the reach of my scientific probing" (Martel, 5).

Life of Pi also constructs a new aesthetic experience by populating the plot with sentient animals. Animals like tiger, hyena, orangutan and zebra are present in every element of a novel including plot, characterization, setting, dialogue and symbolism. The plot of the novel is largely driven by animals and animal-loving human beings. Also significant is the presence of Pi's communication with animals which substitute the conventional dialogue of a novel. At one point Pi also tweaks the conventional animal symbolism by employing zoomorphism and identifying human character types with reference to the hyena, orang-utan, zebra, meercats, and tiger.

Yann Martel presents animals as subjects with their own personhood, an agency, and moral consideration. He presents the Zoo town of animals with giraffes, monkeys, rhinoceros, elephants, and hippopotamuses. Each one shows his/her distinct personality and species-specific characteristics. However, Martel also shows his anthropocentrism when he compares some behavioural characteristics of animals to that of the unhygienic habits of alcoholics.

Human-nonhuman coexistence is emphasized throughout the narrative. Pi's early morning alarm clock is the pride of lions. In a short time, from the wake-up call to leaving for school, Pi is met by many animals and is aware of their presence in his life: "Breakfast was punctuated by the shrieks and cries of howler, monkeys, hill mynahs and Moluccan cockatoos. I left for the school under the benevolent gaze not only of Mother but also of bright-eyed otters and burly American bison and stretching and yawning orang-utans" (Martel, 14)

Though Pi presents Zoos as safe places for animals and criticizes the notion of imagined freedom that animals enjoy in forests, his description of zoo animals supports Joan Dunayer's criticism of the zoo keeping business: "While zoo visitors experience what the industry calls "habitat immersion", the inmates experience exhibit imprisonment. Their worlds extend no farther than transparent plastic walls, invisible electrified wire, or scarcely perceptible mesh" (Dunayer, 74).

Pi's anthropocentric attitude is apparent in his comparison of animals and human beings: "If a man, boldest and most intelligent of creatures, won't wander from place to place, a stranger to all, beholden to none, why would an animal, which is by temperament far more conservative?" (Martel, 16). Pi tries to justify the displacement, exploitation, and enslavement of animals in zoos in the name of the conservation of species diversity by continuously comparing animals with non-living things: "An animal inhabits its space, whether in a zoo or in the wild, in the same way chess

pieces move about a chessboard – significantly. There is no more happenstance, no more “freedom”, involved in the whereabouts of a lizard or a bear or a deer than in the location of a knight on a chessboard” (Martel, 16). He maintains that as animals are territorial creatures they consider zoos as their personal territory and feel like landlords rather than prisoners in zoos. Moreover, Pi creates a hypothetical situation in which he bestows intelligence on animals and claims that if animals had working intelligence like human beings, they would prefer zoos to living in the wild. However, Sam Threadgill, director of Freedom for Animals, also known as Captive Animals’ Protection Society, compares human beings with zoo animals in the lockdown period of Covid 19 to propose a completely different point of view of that of Pi about how animals feel in zoos: “...as we struggle with adjusting to being locked up all day – it’s quite something to think about the fact that this is the reality animals face every single day...” (Moore).

However, Pi becomes an advocate of animal rights as he maintains: “The most dangerous animal in a zoo is Man” (Martel, 29). He also narrates the incidents where animals were tortured in zoos by zookeepers as well as visitors. He reveals the true objective of zoo keeping: “To prosper, a zoo needs parliamentary government ... Impossible to enjoy animals otherwise”. (Martel, 79). Moreover, he details how animals are treated like property – a non-living thing, in cross-border trade.

Martel breaks the stereotype by introducing a Bengal tiger with a human name – Richard Parker. Pi, instead of being scared to see a tiger, guides him to swim towards the only lifeboat he had and by doing so he rejects the human-animal divide based on territories. It also punctures the notion of a conventional relationship between a predator and prey. Pi’s biophilia, an innate love, respect and kinship with all living things and nature, is apparent when he starts missing his zoo animals after the shipwreck: “And what of my extended family – birds, beasts and reptiles? They too have drowned. Every single thing I value in life has been destroyed” (Martel, 98). However, Pi immediately realises the dangers of not maintaining a safe distance from wildlife and tries to get rid of the tiger unsuccessfully.

Martel supports a new theory, painism propounded by Richard Ryder, by giving equal moral consideration to the suffering of animals and humans in the face of adversity: “The ship shook and there was that sound, the monstrous metallic burp. What was it? Was it the collective scream of humans and animals protesting their oncoming death?” (Martel, 104).

Pi, while describing the power of the five senses of animals, reverses the orthodox anthropocentric view and shows animals as far more superior to human beings: “Of the five senses, tigers rely the most on their sight. Their eyesight is very keen, especially in detecting motion. Their hearing is good. Their smell is average. I mean compared to other animals, of course. Next to Richard Parker, I was deaf, blind and nose-dead” (Martel, 108).

Joan Dunayer, animal rights advocate and writer of *Animal Equality* (2001), and *Speciesism* (2004), proposes in her speech: “It means that all animals have an equal right to moral consideration and legal protection. And by “all animals” I mean all sentient beings, every creature who can feel. It’s reasonable and right to treat any creature with a nervous system as a sentient” (Dunayer). Like modern animal rights’ activists, Pi considers all animals as sentient beings. He despises himself for killing a fish for food: “... I had blood on my hands. It’s a terrible burden to carry. All sentient life is sacred” (Martel, 183). Pi also reveals the strategy used by meat-selling industries to blunt the natural compassion of human beings for animals. He realises that the fish, once killed, looked like the fish sold in the Pondicherry fish market. He admits that it didn’t look

like the vibrant, full-of-life sentient being: "It was something else, something outside the essential scheme of creation" (Martel, 183). Pi, here, refers to what Carol J Adams calls "the absent referent" in her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. The main function of an absent referent is to keep a meat eater away from the fact that the meat on his/her plate was once a living animal. Moreover, Pi is against the hunting of whales and calls it "a heinous crime" (Martel, 230). He not only gives personhood and citizenship to all marine life but alleviates them to the position of angels: "What I saw was an upside-down town, small, quiet and peaceable, whose citizens went about with the sweet civility of angles" (Martel, 198). He also punctures the socially constructed notion that animals lack linguistic capability. He learns to communicate with Richard Parker and successfully decodes his response. Pi maintains that Richard Parker "spoke a simple, forcefully punctuated language" (Martel, 207).

The main focus of second part of the novel – The Pacific Ocean – is human and animal coexistence. It portrays in detail the law of nature – survival of the fittest. Zebra and orang-utan are killed by hyena, whereas hyena is eaten by the tiger. Pi gradually becomes indifferent to the suffering of the zebra and orang-utan as he feels that their presence has kept the hyena distracted and he didn't attack Pi. It shows a deep-rooted speciesism and social conditioning where the sacrifice of animals is justified for the wellbeing of humans. Pi would have easily become Richard Parker's meal if he had not used the tiger's language of sound, sign, and symbols to mark his territory. Richard Parker has been given not just agency and personhood but he is portrayed as a being with consciousness. He doesn't attack Pi, learns to stay in his territory, takes instructions from Pi and even depends on Pi for his food. On the other hand, the bestiality of a human being is shown when Pi behaves more like a carnivorous animal who relishes raw meat. Martel demonstrates in Pi what Huggan and Tiffin state: "... the beast resides within the human, and is brought to the surface by exceptional circumstances" (Huggan and Tiffin, 175). Pi admits that he ate exactly like Richard Parker, frantically, hardly chewing the meat before gulping it down.

Pi's character develops, from being anthropocentric to non-speciesist, in the company of Richard Parker. Pi was a great admirer of zoos and upheld the philosophy that there is no such thing as freedom for animals in forests. He was an advocate of keeping animals behind bars in zoos where they are provided with everything that they need. He even condemned animal lovers' opposition to zoo keeping business. However, after observing many days his lone companion, Richard Parker, in the Pacific Ocean, Pi states: "If you want to see wildlife, it is on foot, and quietly, that you must explore a forest" (Martel, 176). *Life of Pi* is a narrative that shows the dualistic nature of the human-animal relationship. It shows the continuous shift between animals as wild beasts and as companion species. On the one hand, Richard Parker becomes friendly with Pi to the extent that he allows Pi to pet him; on the other hand, Pi kills and eats all sorts of marine creatures like a cannibal. It punctures the social stereotypes of humanity of humans and the Bestiality/animality of animals. Martel shows the possibility of peaceful coexistence by gradually reducing both Pi and Richard Parker to two starving mammals, reacting almost alike to the harsh weather and baffling the ecosystem of the Pacific Ocean.

Pi shares an ambivalent relationship of love and hate, affection and fear, companion and foe with Richard Parker. Though he keeps a safe distance from Parker, shares food with him, treats him as a fellow castaway, and pretends to give him freedom; he manipulates Parker's behaviour to his benefit by adding salt water to Parker's food and keeping him drowsy. The lifeboat gets converted into a zoo with Pi being an alpha male between the two. He had even devised plans to kill Parker.

Paradoxically, when Pi was thinking of getting rid of Parker, he hears Parker making Prusten sound: "Prusten is the quietest of tiger calls, a puff through the nose to express friendliness and harmless intentions" (Martel, 163-164). It is at this moment Pi decides to tame him rather than kill him: "It was not a question of him or me, but of him and me" (Martel, 164).

Pi's keen observation of Parker and the ecosystem of the Pacific Ocean turn out to be a journey of self-discovery in relation to a larger ecosystem. Shedding off the social conditioning of speciesism, anthropocentrism, and spatial boundaries between species, Pi reshapes his personality in close contact with other species. The narrative uses the techniques of a stream of consciousness. When Japanese representatives of the Maritime Department of the Ministry of Transport disbelieve Pi's story with Richard Parker, it is not just a rejection of a story, but a rejection of an idea of human-animal mutual and peaceful coexistence. It is a denial to hear the voices of animals and treat them with personhood, consciousness, and agency. The investigators wanted a story with human beings. It shows the ingrained anthropocentrism. However, when Pi provides another version of the story devoid of animals, the investigators, finally, prefer the original story with animals. The story ends with the separation of Pi and Richard Parker and Parker moving to a jungle without bidding farewell to Pi. Nonetheless, the investigators' acceptance of the 'story with animals' shows that human lives are intertwined with non-human lives and they are inseparable.

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