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An Analysis of Symbiotic Relationship Between Pi and Richard Parker in *Life of Pi* from the Perspective of Ecocriticism

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Abstract

This thesis uses ecocriticism theory to deeply analyze Yann Martel's Life of Pi. It explains Pi's fear and early adaptation when they first met, the growth of interdependence over time, until the symbiotic relationship matures and stabilizes. It reveals the interdependent nature of man and nature, the importance of nature's spiritual comfort to humans beings and the importance of following the laws of nature to achieve harmonious coexistence. Through the interaction between the two, anti-anthropocentrism is demonstrated, criticizing humans arrogance towards nature. Combined with the current ecological crisis, this thesis emphasizes the reference to symbiotic wisdom, explores the path of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature from multiple levels, and provides thinking for solving the current ecological dilemma.

Keywords

Life of Pi, symbiotic relationship, ecocriticism, anti-anthropocentrism, ecological wisdom

1. Introduction

In Yann Martel's gripping work *Life of Pi*, the fantastic experience of Pi and the Bengal tiger Richard Parker on the lifeboat has aroused the imagination and deep thinking of countless readers. Pi coexists with the beast in a desperate situation, and the two gradually develop a subtle and close symbiotic relationship from the initial unfamiliarity and fear. This thesis uses ecocriticism theory to deeply analyze this symbiotic phenomenon, aiming to reveal the internal mechanism of the alliance between Pi and Richard Parker, explore the ecological wisdom contained therein, and provide critical thinking for the current symbiotic dilemma between man and nature. As ecological problems become increasingly serious, literary works, as a mirror reflecting society and humans nature, provide us with a unique perspective to re-examine the relationship between man and nature, and *Life of Pi* is undoubtedly an excellent example in this exploration journey.

2. Overview of Ecocriticism Theory and *Life of Pi*

2.1 Brief Introduction to Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s when global environmental problems were worsening, which led to people's growing concerns about the ecological environment (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). It is an interdisciplinary literary criticism method that combines literary research with ecological concepts and aims to explore the inextricable connection between literature and the natural environment.

The origin of ecocriticism is closely related to people's gradual awakening to the ecological crisis. With the acceleration of industrialization and urbanization, the negative impact of humans activities on the natural environment has become more and more significant, such as over-exploitation of resources, destruction of ecosystems, and environmental pollution. In this social context, the academic community began to reflect on the role of literature in dealing with ecological problems. In 1978, American scholar William Rueckert first proposed the concept of "ecocriticism"¹²⁵ (Rueckert, 1978). His advocacy of a "green" innovative perspective on literary research laid the foundation for the development of the field of ecocriticism, and at the same time prompted many scholars to begin to examine literary works from an ecological perspective.

Cheryll Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism has been widely recognized. She defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the material environment" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). This definition clarifies the core research scope of ecocriticism and guides researchers to focus on the way the natural environment is presented in literary works, as well as the author's ecological concepts and attitudes behind this presentation. Leopold emphasized that humans should regard themselves as members of the land ecological community and respect the integrity, stability and intrinsic value of the ecosystem (Leopold, 1949). This concept inspires ecocritics to pay more attention to exploring the understanding and care of the entire ecosystem embodied in the works, as well as the role and responsibility of humans in it when analyzing literary works.

In the 20th and 21st century, the global environmental movement flourished, and people paid great attention to environmental issues. Ecocriticism emerged as a unique perspective of literary research. Scholars recognize the power of literature to shape public cognition and values, and hope to use ecocriticism to enhance public awareness of ecological protection. Critics analyze the environmental themes and ecological concepts of literary works to inspire readers to resonate and encourage them to participate in environmental protection.

2.2 Plot Summary of *Life of Pi*

The protagonist of the story, Pi, grew up in India. His father ran a zoo. He was exposed to many religions since he was young and was full of curiosity about faith. Due to changes in the situation, the whole family immigrated to Canada by boat with the animals. On the way, the boat sank in a storm. Pi was lucky to board a lifeboat with a zebra, a hyena, an orangutan and a Bengal tiger Richard Parker. The hyena first bit the injured zebra and orangutan to death, and were then killed by the tiger. From then on, Pi began his drifting life with Richard Parker, the tiger. He used his wisdom to deal with Richard, search for food,

and survive in the vast ocean. He experienced all kinds of hardships on the way. After 227 days of drifting, they finally arrived at the coast of Mexico, and the tiger walked into the jungle and disappeared. After being rescued, Pi told people about this thrilling and miraculous experience.

3. Evolution of Symbiosis of Pi and Richard Parker

3.1 The First Encounter and Early Adjustments

In the cramped and dangerous space of the lifeboat, Pi's first encounter with Richard Parker instantly dragged him into the cruelest side of nature. Ecological criticism theory points out that humans are in the natural ecosystem and are inextricably linked with other creatures (Wang, 2015). When facing top predators, instinctive awe and fear will be stimulated. At this time, Pi truly felt his own insignificance and fragility. This fear is the primitive reaction of humans in the face of natural forces. However, Pi was not completely swallowed by fear. He began to try to use ecological wisdom to survive. He knew that he had to respect Richard Parker's territory and habits. He used the limited supplies on the lifeboat to hastily build a simple shelter, carefully avoiding angering the tiger while trying to find a safe space in the "ruling area" of this beast. During this stage, Pi was like a newcomer in the ecosystem. In fear, he tries to adapt to the environment of coexistence with powerful creatures. This starts the difficult adjustment of the relationship between the two and initially shows humans's exploration of the rules of survival in extreme natural situations.

3.2 The Growth of Interdependence over Time

As the days passed slowly on the vast sea, Pi's state of mind underwent a profound change in the torment of loneliness. Ecocriticism advocates paying attention to the dynamic relationship between humans and natural creatures. At this time, the existence of Richard Parker has gone beyond a simple threat to Pi. Pi realized that in this endless nothingness, if the tiger starved to death, he would not only lose his "companion" to fight loneliness, but also might fall into despair due to the plague caused by the corpse. So Pi began to take the initiative to take the responsibility of feeding Richard Parker. Truly I do. I love you, Richard Parker. "If I didn't have you now, I don't know what I would do. I don't think I would make it. No, I wouldn't. I would die of hopelessness. Don't give up, Richard Parker, don't give up. I'll get you to land, I promise, I promise!" (Martel, 2001) This monologue and behavior marks the relationship between the two from one-way fear defense to mutual dependence. From an ecological perspective, this breaks the simple predator-prey model between humans and animals and builds a close bond based on survival needs. As some ecocritics emphasize, in extreme environments, the interdependence between species will be magnified. This is exactly the case with Pi and Richard Parker. They gradually formed a tacit understanding, and their survival dependence on each other became deeper, reshaping the inherent paradigm of humans and natural creatures getting along.

3.3 The Maturity and Stabilization of the Symbiotic Tie

When the drift entered the later stage, the symbiosis between Pi and Richard Parker reached a state of near-perfect harmony. Pi skillfully controlled the lifeboat and distributed food and fresh water in an

orderly manner, like an experienced navigator; Richard Parker also put away his former wildness, had his own resting corner on the boat, and no longer attacked Pi at will. In the critical moment when the storm hit, Pi held the rope of the lifeboat tightly, and Richard Parker also curled up in its corner. They survived the strong winds and huge waves together (Martel, 2001). This scene vividly explained that they had become a community with the same breath and destiny. At this time, the symbiosis between the two had long transcended the dependence on the material level and sublimated to the tacit understanding and fusion in the depths of the soul. The concept of harmonious coexistence between man and nature in ecocriticism theory is profoundly reflected here. They work together to resist natural disasters. Every time they share adversity, they deepen their bonds with each other and become the spiritual pillar for each other to never give up in desperate situations. It demonstrates the tenacity and resilience of life in extreme difficulties, and highlights the possibility of deep dependence and co-evolution between different species in an ecosystem.

4. Ecological Echoes in the Symbiosis

4.1 Symbols that Embody Nature and Creature Bonds

In the microcosm of the sea constructed in this work, the lifeboat is undoubtedly a subtle ecological microcosm. Richard Parker symbolizes the wild and unrestrained power of nature, and Pi represents the wisdom of humans civilization. Every interaction between the two on the boat is full of hidden symbolic meanings. From the perspective of ecocriticism, fish is a practical means for Pi to obtain energy for survival, and it is also the material bond between him and Richard Parker. It symbolizes the endless food chain cycle in nature and embodies the basic principles of energy flow and species dependence in the ecosystem. When Pi looks up at the stars and listens to the waves, it is a sacred moment for humans to engage in spiritual dialogue with the vast natural environment, a sincere questioning of the soul to the universe and nature, and a symbol of humans awe and spiritual pursuit of nature. Literary works are accustomed to using the magical brush of symbolism to map grand ecological connections with miniature landscapes. With its ingenious conception, *Life of Pi* skillfully weaves complex and obscure ecological ties into vivid images and wonderful plots, making readers feel as if they are in the story and understand the close connection between man and nature imperceptibly. It greatly expands and deepens the practical scope of ecocritical theory in text interpretation and provides a classic example for ecological literature research.

4.2 The Non-binary Metaphor of Man and Nature

At the beginning of the drift, there was tension and confrontation between Pi and Richard Parker. Driven by his survival instinct, Pi regarded the tiger as a threat to his life, and tried to keep a distance from it and prevent its attack. This reaction reflects the common fear and vigilance of humans when facing nature, and is also a manifestation of the traditional binary opposition concept: humans divide themselves and nature into two completely different camps, facing nature with a confrontational attitude (Wang & Wu, 2014). However, as the drifting life on the lifeboat continued, the relationship between Pi and Richard

Parker gradually changed. In this process, Pi gradually realized that in the specific environment of the vast ocean, his fate was closely linked to that of the tiger. They faced survival challenges such as food shortages and bad weather together, and became part of each other's survival. Pi began to fish for the tiger, and the presence of the tiger also made Pi always vigilant and dared not relax his efforts to survive. This interdependent relationship broke the simple opposition model between humans and nature in the traditional sense. humans and nature do not exist in isolation, but are in a complex ecosystem, influencing and interacting with each other. humans cannot place themselves above nature and plunder and destroy it at will; nor is nature completely independent of humans and has no influence on humans behavior (Zhang, 2015). In the novel, the narrow space of the lifeboat becomes a symbol of the interdependence between humans and nature. It is like a microscopic ecosystem, in which Pi and the tiger each play a unique role and jointly maintain a delicate balance.

4.3 Ecological Insights from the Symbiosis

Ecocriticism emphasizes the multiple values of nature to humans beings. It is not only a supplier of material resources, but also a source of spiritual comfort. On the vast ocean, Pi was separated from the familiar humans society and fell into extreme loneliness. At this time, the existence of Richard Parker became the key link between him and the outside world. In the process of narrating to the writer, Pi sighed that in those days when loneliness made people crazy, Richard Parker's existence made him feel that he was still alive and connected to this world (Martel, 2001), which deeply reflects the supporting role of natural creatures on the humans spiritual level. In the long process of symbiosis between the two, Pi always respected and cared for Richard Parker, which is a vivid metaphor for humans beings to re-recognize the subjectivity of nature. It warns us that nature has its own internal operating laws, just like the precise self-regulation mechanism of the ecosystem. It's also seen as a kind of postcolonial ecocriticism—an emerging cultural and literary theory—which includes the exploration of the evidence it contains regarding the history of Western imperialist aggression and colonization, as well as the lack of ecological awareness (Miao, 2015). Only by following its rhythm can humans achieve harmonious coexistence.

5. Anti-anthropocentrism Through the Symbiosis

5.1 Wisdom Drawn from Pi and Parker's Adventure

The thrilling adventure of Pi and Richard Parker on the lifeboat is like a heavy hammer, which severely breaks the arrogant ice of anthropocentrism. The traditional anthropocentrism believes that humans are the masters of nature and have the right to transform and conquer nature at will. However, in the small and cramped battlefield of the lifeboat, if Pi still holds on to the old thinking and tries to drive away or eliminate Richard Parker, the end is bound to be a mutual destruction. Fortunately, Pi learned humility in the test of life and death, and he began to face the survival demands of tiger as an individual. Pi's inner thoughts, as revealed in the book, indicate that he couldn't view Richard Parker as an enemy. Instead, he recognized Parker as a fellow survivor in the harsh circumstances, struggling to stay alive just like him

(Martel, 2001). Behind this simple words is the profound reflection and subversive reshaping of the relationship between humans and nature. From the perspective of ecocriticism, this is undoubtedly a key turning point for humans to move towards harmonious coexistence with nature. Literature is like a wise mentor, guiding readers to reflect on the arrogant behaviors of humans beings that trample on nature in real life, vigorously advocating the establishment of advanced awareness of treating natural creatures equally, sounding the clarion call for the ecological shift of humans civilization, and prompting humans to re-examine their roles and responsibilities in the natural ecosystem.

5.2 Current Environmental Struggles

Looking at the present, the global ecological crisis is like a raging wave, rolling in. Forests are wailing and falling in the roar of chainsaws, species are extinct under humans greed, and the disasters caused by climate change are like the alarm bells of the end of the world, and the sound is deafening. The desperate situation of Pi and Richard Parker coexisting on the lifeboat is like an accurate microcosm of the tragic ecological situation in reality. humans beings' excessive development and expansion, like a ruthless giant hand, tear the natural habitats of animals into pieces, forcing them to curl up in small and cramped living corners like lifeboats; once the ecological balance is broken, the chain reaction will be like an out-of-control domino, just like the chaotic collapse of the bloody food chain on the lifeboat. At this moment, humans beings are drifting with nature in an uncertain future. If humans do not stop in time, reflect on and innovate the development model, what awaits us will be an ecological abyss of no return. Ecocriticism plays the important role of a sharp ideological blade, helping us to clearly see the hideous face of the current ecological dilemma, and then triggering in-depth exploration and serious thinking about the future development path of mankind, emphasizing that mankind must abandon the short-sighted development model and rebuild a harmonious relationship with nature with a sustainable development perspective.

5.3 Course for Harmonious Coexistence

Drawing on the symbiotic wisdom that Pi and Richard Parker explored in desperate situations, humankind's journey toward harmonious coexistence requires multiple paths. In terms of concept formation, education has shouldered the responsibility of popularizing ecological knowledge. Through multiple channels such as classrooms and the media, it has spread the seeds of respect for nature and awe of life to the people, allowing ecological awareness to take root in the depths of their hearts. As advocated by ecocriticism, only when the whole society forms a correct understanding of nature can ecological protection actions be fundamentally promoted. In terms of policy guidance, the government should hold high the banner of the rule of law, introduce strict environmental protection laws and regulations, build a strong protective barrier for the natural ecology, strictly control over-exploitation, and do its utmost to protect biodiversity; this is a necessary measure to ensure ecological balance through legal means based on the integrity and fragility of the ecosystem. In terms of action implementation, green technology is like the light of hope, illuminating the way forward, vigorously promoting green lifestyles such as the use of renewable energy and reducing the consumption of disposable products, and prompting humans

to manage resources as carefully as Pi on the giant lifeboat of the earth, and realize the grand blueprint of sustainable development. This series of initiatives are bold breakthroughs and pragmatic responses to real ecological problems under the brilliant guidance of ecocritical theory, and aim to achieve long-term harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

6. Conclusion

Looking at the whole book, with the help of the sharp perspective of ecocriticism, the symbiotic relationship between Pi and Richard Parker in *Life of Pi* can be deeply analyzed. From the initial panic-stricken confrontation of fear, to the mutual dependence appreciation in the middle period, and then to the rock-solid symbiosis in the later period, this ups and downs process vividly reveals the hidden interdependence mechanism between humans beings and nature, as well as the anti-anthropocentric ecological wisdom contained therein that can subvert tradition. This symbiotic legend in the work is by no means just a fascinating literary adventure. It is more like a warning bell hanging high in the sky of the times, ringing the alarm bell for the present day that is deeply trapped in the ecological quagmire, and like a shining survival guide, lighting the way forward for the confused humans beings. It urges us to learn the profound lessons from the story, reevaluate our own position and role in relation to nature, and make every effort to explore the bright path of harmonious coexistence between man and nature in the vast real world. And by avoiding falling into an irreversible ecological impasse, we can continue to write the magnificent epic of humans beings and nature working together to create and prosper together. Ecocriticism is used as a sharp weapon to deeply dissect literary works, and is determined to awaken the world to cherish and be vigilant about ecological issues. It is hoped that humans can always adhere to the sacred principles of respect, equality and harmony in every interaction with nature, and work together to protect the earth, our warm home.

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