

From Vegetarian to Cannibal: A Literary Analysis of a Journey of Innocence in 'Life of Pi'

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Abstract : Language use and aesthetic appreciation are integral to meaning-making in prose, as they are in poetry. However, in comparison to poetic analysis, a literary analysis of prose that focuses on linguistics and stylistics is somewhat scarce as it generally requires the study of lengthy texts. Nevertheless, the effect of linguistic and stylistic features in prose as conscious design by authors for creating specific effects and conveying preconceived messages is drawing increasing attention of linguists and literary experts. A close examination of language use in prose can, among a host of literary purposes, convey emotive and cognitive values and contribute to making interpretations about how fictional characters are represented to the imaginative reader. This paper provides a literary analysis of Yann Martel's narrative of a 14-year-old Indian boy, Pi, who had survived the wreck of a Japanese cargo ship, by focusing on his 227-day journey of tribulations, along with a Bengal tiger, on a lifeboat. The study favours a pluralistic approach blending literary criticism, linguistic analysis and stylistic description. It adopts Leech and Short's (2007) broad framework of linguistic and stylistic categories (lexical categories, grammatical categories, figures of speech etc. [sic] and context and cohesion) as well as a range of other relevant linguistic phenomena to show how the narrator, Pi, and the author influence the reader's interpretations of Pi's character. Such interpretations are made using the lens of Freud's psychoanalytical theory (which focuses on the interplay of the instinctual id, the ego and the moralistic superego) and Blake's philosophy of innocence and experience (the two contrary states of the human soul). The paper traces Pi's transformation from animal-loving, God-fearing vegetarian to brutal animal slayer and cannibal in his journey of survival. By a close examination of the linguistic and stylistic features of the narrative, it argues that, despite evidence of butchery and cannibalism, Pi's gruesome behaviour is motivated by extreme physiological and psychological duress and not intentional malice. Finally, the paper concludes that the voice of the narrator, Pi, and that of the author, Martel, act as powerful persuasive agents in influencing the reader to respond with a sincere flow of sympathy for Pi and judge him as having retained his innocence in his instinctual need for survival.

Keywords : foregrounding, innocence and experience, lexis, literary analysis, psychoanalytical lens, style

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