

Behind the Screen: The Challenges of Film Adaptations in Yann Martel and Ang Lee's *Life of Pi*

R. Antony Vincily
Research Scholar
Holy Cross College (Autonomous)
Nagercoil.

Dr. Alby Grace
Assistant Professor of English
Holy Cross College (Autonomous)
Nagercoil.

Abstract:

Film adaptations from literary works prove to be a successful genre in contemporary times. This paper portrays the transformation of Yann Martel's novel into a Oscar winning film and the different aspects adopted in the literary as well as visual medium. Due to different characteristics of the written and visual media, adapting literary works for the cinema poses many theoretical as well as technical problems. The most obvious evidence of this fact is the frequency of complaints about unsuccessful adaptations. In spite of those controversies, adaptations were done and they came out successful because cinema proved to be powerful media. Both literate and illiterate can understand everything without missing anything. All the pictures, sounds, and emotions stay on in the minds of the audience for a long time. This paper deals some of the problems and challenges concerning the adaptation of script for the screen and also how both the author and the director successfully overcome it.

Keywords:

Film adaptations, Life of Pi, Challenges of film makers, Ang Lee, Yann Martel.

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A common form of film adaptation is the use of a novel as the basis of a feature film. Other works adapted into films include non-fiction, autobiography, comic books, scriptures, plays, historical sources, and even other films. From the earliest days of cinema in the nineteenth century Europe, adoption from diverse sources has been a ubiquitous practice of film-making. Due to different characteristics of the written and visual media, adapting literary works for cinema poses many theoretical as well as technical problems. The most obvious evidence of this fact is the frequency of complaints about unsuccessful adaptations. This paper

overviews the transformation of Yann Martel's novel into a Oscar winning film and the difficulties and challenges concerning the adaptation of script for screen.

In spite of the challenges, adaptations were done and they came out successful because cinema proved to be powerful media. Both literate and illiterate can understand the theme, moral ideas, and imaginations of the Director, or Script writer, without missing anything. Film portrays the real life. It offers us an experience of beauty. All the pictures, sounds, and emotions stay on in the minds of the audience for a long time.

The most important issue of adapting great literary classics into movies is the fidelity to the original source – the novel. Many people will instinctively believe the film adaptation is inferior compared to the novel. The main goal of comparison of the two media is based on the success of the film to capture the vital meaning and values of the novel into a commercially successful film. Film is just as capable of obtaining deep meaning through the use of metaphors or symbolism. In order to attain a successful adaptation of a novel, certain features that are considered to be the essential meaning of the novel should be translated in the film.

Novel adaptations attempt either to appeal to an existing commercial audience or to tap into the innovation and novelty of a less well known author. Inevitably, the question of 'faithfulness' arises, and the more high profile the source novel, the more insistent are the questions of fidelity. In some cases, however, film adaptations will also interpolate scenes or invent characters. This is especially true when a novel is part of a literary saga. Incidents or quotes from later or earlier novels will be inserted into a single film.

Additionally, and far more controversially, film makers will invent new characters or create stories that were not present in the source material at all. For example, William Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Ironweed*, had a very small section with a prostitute names Helen. Because the film studio anticipated a female audience for the film and had Meryl Streep for the role, Helen became a significant part of the film. Change in adaptation is essential and practically unavoidable, mandated both by the constraints of time and medium, but there must be always a balance.

Some film theorists have argued that a director should be entirely unconcerned with the source, as a novel is a novel, while a film is a film, and the two works of art must be seen as separate entities. One of the most basic problems of adaptation is the necessity to leave out parts of the literary material, and on the other hand, to fill the gaps that the author has left to the reader's imagination. Since commercial films rarely exceed the limit of two – and - a half hours, it becomes necessary to leave out scenes or whole subplots when the literary work is very long.

Successful and well appreciated books have been made into equally exciting and gripping films. Such as top films based on novels include, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Gulliver's Travel*, *The Tempest*, *The Color Purple*, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, *The Untouchables*, *Slumdog Millionaire*. These films made the authors well-known in their universal literary circle.

Here, the film *Life of Pi* by Ang Lee based on the novel of the same name by Yann Martel serves as an example. In the cinema, it is often better to leave out some elements completely than to introduce them, without any subsequent development due to temporal and financial limits. A good screenwriter should not hesitate to reduce a long monologue to one fierce look, if the conveyed message remains unchanged. The opening lines of film such as, "inspired by a true story", "Adapted from the novel by" or "Based on the short stories of" immediately raise questions about the film's authorship in the mind of the viewer.

The adaptation of a written text to a film text engenders certain unique challenges for both the film maker and the spectator. The viewer, like other characters in the film, cannot read a character's inner thoughts or intentions as they might on the pages, the film must present the same information in a different effective mode. In an essay titled, *Adaptation*, film theorist Dudley Andrew writes, "the making of a film out of an earlier text is virtually as old as the machinery of cinema itself. Well over half of all commercial films have come from literary originals though by no means all of these originals are revered or respected"(3).

There is a notion that everything is adaptable, that whatever exists in one medium might be adapted or translated into another, given the right imaginative initiative. Some may protest, of course, that the medium of film has its limitations, that it is epidermal, even superficial, that it cannot probe the depths of psychology or emotional consciousness. Apart from human psychology, there are narrative and novelistic techniques that could be considered "unfilmable".

There are challenges faced by both Yann Martel, for writing the novel, *Life of Pi* and Ang Lee for screening the film, *Life of Pi*. The novel which has been sold more than ten million copies worldwide was rejected by at least five London publishing houses before being accepted by Knopf Canada, which published it in September 2001. Martel explains his experiences before writing the novel, in his interview in the Guardian Weekly as follows: "Each chapter was anchored by notes in separate envelopes, creating a master plan. I just went from envelope until I got to 100 chapters. I cannot imagine personally writing any other because what happens in chapter 10 will affect what happens in chapter 90. I plan everything out, creating a book "brick by brick".

Life of Pi is said to be a 2012 American 3D live – action and computer – animated adventure drama film. The film had its worldwide premiere as the opening film of the 50th New York film festival at both the Walter Reade Theater and Alice

Tully Hall in New York City on September 28th, 2012. Upon release *Life of Pi* became a critical and commercial success, earning over 600 million dollar worldwide. Before Lee, the project had been rejected by numerous directors and writers. In February 2009, Fox 2000 pictures hired Ang Lee to direct the film. “I read the book when it first came out, and it was obvious it couldn’t be a movie. And then Fox approached me about making it, about four years ago. I thought it for two months, and I was fascinated. The movie relies upon illusion and storytelling, and they are my skills. I suppose I was hooked”, recalls Ang Lee in one of his interviews.

The film-maker is known for compulsively seeking challenges. The biggest challenge is to date, both a tiger and an ocean. Neither could be real, and both would require advanced special effects. Lee says that there were three thousand people on set, trying to make it work. And literally, if one thing goes right in a day, it is a miracle. After shooting in Pondicherry, India in a 200,000 square-foot studio with a crew of almost 600, the production team moved to Taiwan. The world’s largest self-generating wave tank was created for a journey aboard a lifeboat with Pi and Richard Parker. The visual effects were not too bad. But the dealing with water on the set and having the hours spent by was very stressful to Lee. Shooting in water tank was very hopeless for him, but it came out very well and it really looks as a tremendous ocean.

Ocean scenes of the film were shot at a giant water tank built by the crew in an abandoned airport. The tank is known as the world’s largest self-generating wave tank, with a capacity of 1.7 million gallons. With production scheduled to last two and a half months at the tank, cinematographer Claudio Miranda assisted in the tank’s design in order to get the most out of it for lighting, explaining, “We knew we were going to be inside there shooting for two and a half months, so it was worth it to be able to do anything we want. On all these kinds of scenes, we had an idea of what the weather would be like. In the tank, I can create storm clouds, nightfall. We had curtains that I can block out light, doors to open and let in real sunlight”.

If ever there was a twenty-first century vision of William Blake’s “Tiger, tiger, burning bright”, it is Ang Lee’s film, *Life of Pi*. Next to Pi, the most important character in the plot is Richard Parker, the adult Bengal tiger. He lives on the lifeboat with Pi. He is kept alive by Pi’s food and water supplies. He develops a relationship with Pi that allows them to coexist in their struggle. In the film, the tiger was created with digital animation. His eyes, his fur, the rippling of his muscles, and the skeleton beneath his skin, all of it is so perfectly rendered that the audience swear that Richard Parker is real. Ang Lee says in an interview,

We had to make Richard Parker a CGI creature. We couldn’t risk crew members getting eaten. But we brought in four Bengal tigers with a trainer, and we set up a ‘boat’ inside a tiger enclosure to shoot a few key scenes. There is one of the Richard Parker(s) swimming in the

ocean. That's a real tiger. With that in the film, the tiger had to look as real in the rest of the scenes. ("An exclusive interview with Ang Lee")

Life is Pi had a wide release in the United States on November 21st, 2012, in both traditional and 3D viewing formats. The film did well internationally and is one of the few Hollywood films to earn more in China than in the United States. In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, renowned director James Cameron highlighted the use of 3D in the film stating that *Life of Pi* breaks the paradigm that 3 – D has to be some big, action fantasy spectacle, superhero movie. The movie is visually amazing, inventive, and it works on you in ways you're not really aware of. It takes you on a journey, and unless you've read the book – which I hadn't – you have no idea where that journey is going. It does what good 3 – D is supposed to do; which is, it allows you to forget you are watching a 3 – D movie.

Yann Martel, the author of the novel found the film to be a "delightful adaptation". He says that he is happy that it works so well as a film. Even if the ending is not as ambiguous as the books the possibility that there might be another version of Pi's story comes at you unexpectedly and raises the same important questions about truth, perception and belief. However, Martel himself appreciates Lee by saying that it was far easier to write the book than film the movie with its originality regarding nature, with the help of advanced technologies possible. Both the book and the film are engrossing and charming. The only difference is that the book takes more time. But the film proves to be a real challenge, with its cinematography and 3 – D technology. The film is very inspirational. *Life of Pi* is a hard film to pin down in one concrete category.

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