



Narrative Structure and Theatrical Adaptation in Yann Martel's Life of Pi: A Narratological Study

البنية السردية والاقتباس المسرحي في رواية «حياة باي» ليان مارتل: دراسة سردية لمسرحية لوليتا شاكرابارتي المقتبسة

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Abstract

The adaptation of novels into theatrical performance presents unique artistic and narratological challenges, particularly when the source text relies extensively on complex narrative structures and internal modes of storytelling. Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001) exemplifies this challenge through its multilayered narrative, metafictional framework, shifting focalization, and philosophical exploration of faith, survival, and identity. Despite the novel's critical acclaim and the international success of Lolita Chakrabarti's stage adaptation, relatively limited scholarly attention has been devoted to examining how the novel's narrative architecture contributes to its theatrical adaptability. This study addresses that gap by investigating the relationship between narrative structure and theatrical adaptation in *Life of Pi*.

The study aims to analyze how Martel constructs narrative meaning through layered narration, internal focalization, narrative ambiguity, and metafictional storytelling, and to examine how these elements are transformed into theatrical language in Chakrabarti's adaptation. The research adopts a qualitative textual and comparative approach based on Gérard Genette's narratology, particularly his theories of narrative levels and focalization, together with Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation and selected narratological perspectives. The analysis compares the narrative techniques of the novel with their theatrical realization in the stage script.

The findings demonstrate that *Life of Pi* possesses an inherently performative narrative structure that readily supports theatrical adaptation. Its multilayered narration, shifting perspectives, and sustained ambiguity create opportunities for theatrical reinterpretation through framing devices, dialogue, stage directions, puppetry, visual symbolism, and spatial storytelling. Furthermore, the adaptation successfully preserves the novel's philosophical concerns with truth, belief, spirituality, trauma, and survival while reconfiguring them according to the semiotic resources of live performance.

The study concludes that the success of Chakrabarti's adaptation lies not in reproducing the novel literally but in creatively translating its narrative mechanisms into medium-specific theatrical forms. Consequently, *Life of Pi* demonstrates that narrative structure constitutes one of the principal factors determining a novel's adaptability for the stage and highlights the productive relationship between narratology and adaptation studies in understanding contemporary theatrical adaptations.

Keywords: theatrical adaptation; narrative structure; focalization; narratology; metafiction; *Life of Pi*; Yann Martel; Lolita Chakrabarti.

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المخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة البنية السردية في رواية «حياة باي» للكاتب يان مارتل، وتبحث في كيفية إسهامها في نجاح تحويل الرواية إلى عمل مسرحي من خلال الاقتباس الذي أنجزته لوليتا شاكرابارتي. وتتمثل مشكلة الدراسة في محدودية الاهتمام النقدي بالعلاقة بين البنية السردية وقابلية الرواية للاقتباس المسرحي، ولا سيما في الأعمال التي تعتمد على تعدد مستويات السرد، والتبشير الداخلي، والسرد الماورائي، والغموض السرد. وتهدف الدراسة إلى تحليل الكيفية التي يوظف بها مارتل مستويات السرد، والتبشير، وتقنيات السرد الماورائي، والغموض السرد في بناء روايته، فضلاً عن بيان كيفية إعادة تشكيل هذه العناصر ضمن اللغة المسرحية في الاقتباس الذي قدمته شاكرابارتي.

تعتمد الدراسة المنهج التحليلي النوعي القائم على نظريات السرد ودراسات الاقتباس. ويستند التحليل إلى الطروحات النظرية لكل من جيرار جينيت في مستويات السرد والتبشير، وليندا هنتشون في نظرية الاقتباس، إلى جانب عدد من الدراسات السردية ذات الصلة. وتكشف نتائج الدراسة أن رواية «حياة باي» تمتلك بنية سردية ذات طبيعة أدائية تجعلها مؤهلة بدرجة كبيرة للاقتباس المسرحي، إذ يتيح تعدد مستويات السرد، وتغير وجهات النظر، واستمرار الغموض السرد إعادة تمثيل هذه العناصر من خلال الحوار، والإرشادات المسرحية، والدمى، والرموز البصرية، والبناء المكاني للمسرح. كما تبين الدراسة أن الاقتباس المسرحي نجح في الحفاظ على القضايا الفكرية والفلسفية التي تطرحها الرواية، وفي مقدمتها الحقيقة، والإيمان، والهوية، والصدمة، والبقاء، مع إعادة صياغتها بما يتوافق مع خصوصية الوسيط المسرحي. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن نجاح اقتباس شاكرابارتي لا يكمن في النقل الحرفي للرواية، بل في إعادة إنتاج بنيتها السردية بوسائل مسرحية، مما يؤكد أن البنية السردية تُعد من أهم العوامل التي تحدد قابلية الرواية للاقتباس المسرحي، ويبرز أهمية التكامل بين علم السرد ودراسات الاقتباس في تحليل الاقتباسات المسرحية المعاصرة.

Introduction

The adaptation of literary works into theatrical performance has become an increasingly significant area of study within adaptation and narrative studies. Rather than being regarded as a secondary reproduction of a source text, theatrical adaptation is now understood as a creative process through which narrative elements are reinterpreted according to the aesthetic and performative conventions of the stage. This transformation is particularly challenging when adapting novels whose meanings rely heavily on narration, focalization, temporal shifts, and interior consciousness. Consequently, examining how narrative techniques are translated from the novelistic medium into theatrical performance provides valuable insights into both narrative theory and adaptation studies.

Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001) presents an especially compelling example of this process. Combining survival fiction, philosophical inquiry, religious pluralism, and postmodern narrative experimentation, the novel constructs its meaning through a complex narrative architecture that includes multiple narrative levels, internal focalization, metafiction, and sustained ambiguity. Rather than merely recounting Pi Patel's remarkable survival after a shipwreck, the novel continually interrogates the relationship between storytelling, truth, memory, faith, and identity. These narrative qualities make *Life of Pi* both a rich literary text and a challenging work for theatrical adaptation.

Lolita Chakrabarti's stage adaptation demonstrates how the novel's intricate narrative strategies can be transformed into a performative language through theatrical devices such as framing scenes, dialogue, puppetry, stage directions, visual symbolism, and spatial storytelling. Instead of reproducing the novel's narrative techniques literally, the adaptation reconfigures them according to the semiotic possibilities of live performance while preserving the philosophical and emotional essence of Martel's work. This creative transformation illustrates the adaptive process described by contemporary adaptation theorists, who view adaptation as reinterpretation rather than replication.

Accordingly, this study examines the narrative structure of *Life of Pi* and investigates how its principal narrative features facilitate theatrical adaptation. Drawing primarily on Gérard Genette's narratological concepts of narrative levels and focalization, together with Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation and selected narratological perspectives, the study analyzes the novel's layered narration, metafictional structure, narrative ambiguity, internal focalization,

and the thematic relationship between spirituality, storytelling, and survival. It further explores how these narrative features are reimagined in Chakrabarti's stage adaptation through medium-specific theatrical strategies. By doing so, the study demonstrates that *Life of Pi* possesses an exceptionally adaptable narrative structure in which storytelling itself becomes the central dramatic action, enabling the successful translation of a highly introspective novel into an engaging theatrical experience.

1. Introduction and Background of *Life of Pie*

Yan Martel's *Life of pie* (2001) is a philosophical and a fantasy adventure novel that deeply explores the themes of spirituality, survival, and the transformative power of narrative. The story follows piscine Molitor "Pi Patel" in Pondicherry, a coastal city in southeastern India and was a French colony until 1954. Pi is an Indian boy who is born as Hindu, discovers the catholic faith at the age of fourteen from Father Martin, a Catholic priest, and soon baptized. Then he meets Mr. Kumar, a Muslim of some standing and coverts to Islam. Thus he engages in multiple religious beliefs and openly practices all their traditions. The core of the narrative is Pi's extraordinary survival in a journey during his family's migration from India to Canada in the late 1970s. His family owns a zoo in Pondicherry, and due to political and economic instability they decide to leave India. They transport their animals aboard a Japanese Cargo Ship. After an unexpected shipwreck all the family die and Pie is stranded on a lifeboat with a hyena, zebra, an orangutan named Orange juice, and a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. Shortly after, Pie witnesses the brutal deaths of all the animals and remains the tiger's sole companion for 227 days. This way, the narrative delves into pie's ordeal, spiritual growth, tolerance, and self-awakening during an unusual coexistence between a human and a carnivore.

After being rejected by several London publishing houses, *Life of Pie* was published by Knopf Canada. Following its publication, the novel earned a remarkable success and ten million copies were sold worldwide "earning Martel the 2002 Man Booker Prize among other accolades." In 2012 the novel was adapted for cinema, directed by Ang Lee "featuring Suraj Sharma as Pie"(Gorshin,2025) .

Critics frequently feature the novel for both "its imaginative plot and its metafictional qualities". Margaret Atwood, in her review for *The Sunday Times*, describes the book as an "unbelievable tale that's hard to fully accept"(as cited in Dondeman,2014,p.36).The story's philosophical introspection combined with its adventurous assumption makes it not only a survival narrative but also an exploration of human adaptability and resilience. Consequently, Martel's novel is positioned among the broad survival tradition that includes works such as William Godling's *Lord of Flies*(1954), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*(1719), and cinematic texts like *Cast Away* (2000) and *All is Lost* (2013).However, *Life of Pie* distinguishes itself from conventional survival fiction by foregrounding the act of storytelling as both, a structural device and a thematic concern. Whereas most of the survival stories emphasize realism and physical endurance, Martel's novel addresses interpretation, imagination, and symbolism highlighting the "flexibility and transformative potential of narrative"(Dondeman,2014).

In a multi-narrative perspective coupled with philosophical and spiritual dimensions, Martel sets the stage for the exploration of a young boy's experiences, reflecting his personal and cultural identity.The narrative demonstrate that stories can become a means for preserving the self amid uncertainty, trauma , and displacement.Pie's memories of his family, his devotion to his Indian heritage including religious practices and food tradition form a symbolic framework within which he bargains identity, survival, and adaptation to his unfamiliar and threatening environment (Dondeman,2014) .

Accordingly, this chapter examines how Martel employs narrative structure, postmodern ambiguity, and metafictional storytelling to discuss themes of spirituality, identity, and survival and simultaneously how these elements create a text that strongly lends itself to theatrical adaptation. The novel's blending of realism and imagination, its layered narrative, and shifting perspectives construct a text that can be effectively translated into theatrical performance. By incorporating the narratological theory and adaptation studies, the chapter proves that *Life of Pie* holds the potential of a fascinating stage narrative.

The best and most successful adaptation of *Life of Pie* and the version upon which this chapter is based, is the theatrical adaptation produced by Lolita Chakrabarti. Chakrabarti (1969) is a British playwright and actress of Bengali descent. She began her career as a performer on stage and actress in television series such as *Jekyll, Vera*, and *criminal*. She started her play-writing career with *Red Velvet* in 2012 which earned her several awards. She gained wider acclaim for her stage adaptation of *Life of Pie* which opened at the Crucible theatre in Sheffield in 2019. The production was nominated for nine Olivier awards and received five of them. It also won three Tonys, four YK Theatre Awards and many more. It went on to play around the world, in ART in Boston, The Schoenfeld Theatre on Broadway, a year long US tour, a year long UK tour, Mumbai, a tour of China, a tour of South Korea (Grokopedia, n.d).

2. Narrative Structure, Storytelling, and Perspective in *Life of Pie*

structure that enhances the novel's thematic depth and challenges the conventional distinction between reality and fiction. The novel begins with the author's note in Which an extradiegetic "a Martel like" narrator recounts his first encounter with Francis Adirubasamy in India and though him meeting Pie in Toronto. Initially, the reader gets the impression that this narrator is the actual author. However, as the narrative develops, it becomes evident that it is a narrative strategy where the author is a fictional construct rather than the actual writer. Through this metafictional technique, Martel highlights the artificiality of the story and encourages the readers to question the reliability of narrative credibility (Mill, 2013)

Within this narrative framework, Pie functions as a homodiegetic narrator chronicling his experiences both as a young boy struggling for survival at the sea and later as an adult survival reflecting on that ordeal to some people in Canada. Through this technique of dual narrative position, Matel builds a distinction between experiencing self and narrating self, letting the narrative to switch smoothly between retrospective philosophical reflection and the immediacy of lived experiences, thus broadening the novel's themes of memory, identity, and survival. This narrative structure reflects Genette's concept of layered narration as the narrative is presented through shifting perspectives and multiple narrative levels. Furthermore, these distinctions are indicated by typographical organizations. The extradiegetic narrator is introduced in the Author's Note in italics, while pie play the role of intradiegetic and homodiegetic narrator within the central narrative in standard font, and cursive script is used for Japanese investigators' dialogue. (Xu, 2017)

From a narratological perspective, Gerard Genette's theory of narrative levels clarifies the relationship between the embedded narrative and its frame. Intradiegetic or embedded narration include events recounted within the story, while extradiegetic narration refers to the level above the diegetic events. Xu (2017) illustrates that the extradiegetic author intermittently frames pie's narrative in providing observations, interviews, and details of his later life in Canada. This switching between narrative levels creates what Xu terms a "spatial effect of simultaneity", an effect that allow readers to perceive multiple perspectives simultaneously rather than experiencing them as a single linear plot (Xu, 2017).

Moreover, the extradiegetic narrator enhances credibility in validating Pie's account through documents such as the Japanese officials' report. On the other hand Pie reveals his emotions, experiences, and intimate thoughts in first-person narration. This narrative strategy achieves a fine balance between objectivity and subjectivity and strengthens realism in fostering a sense of trust in Pie's perspective meanwhile maintaining ambiguity. Pie's trauma in the aftermath of the shipwreck and the loss of his family prompts him to urgently recount his ordeal at the sea, thus creating oscillation between the realistic and dreamlike worlds that produce a great deal of mediation between the reader and the text (Xu, 2017; Mill, 2013).

It is worth saying that first-person narration in *Life of Pie* provides for structural flexibility embedding both the narrating self and the experiencing self. Retrospective narration which includes narrating and self reflecting on past experiences, predominates the experiencing self that allows for emotive or rhetorical effect. This dual focalization is manifested in Pie's reflection on his childhood memories of his family's zoo:

"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" (Martel, 2001, p. 15).

This mutual influence of child and adult perspectives is also evident in Pie's confrontation of fear in his ocean journey. He reflects:

"I must say a word about fear. It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary. I learned to fight my fear" (Martel, 2001, p. 162).

Similarly, Pie's spiritual reflection combines "immediacy and retrospection":

"I kept my eyes open for the whale. And for the floating islands. And I prayed" (Martel, 2001, p. 229).

His interactions with the tiger on the boat also present the dual perspective of terror and awe:

"Richard Parker, the tiger, watched me with those yellow eyes. I felt both terror and awe" (Martel, 2001, p. 183).

Moreover, Pie's determination and continuous hope are revealed through his direct thoughts:

"I will not die. I refuse it. I will make it through this" (Martel, 2001, p. 207).

Finally, Pie himself reflects on the process of storytelling, emphasizing the meta-narrative technique:

"Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without?" (Martel, 2001, p. 361).

Martel further assures the act of storytelling as a creative and powerful act throughout the novel. For example, Pie's engagement with the food through its preparation, consumption, and symbolic meaning serves as a metaphor for identity, cultural preservation, and adaptation to new conditions. His love to Indian food traditions symbolizes his connection to his cultural roots even when he is physically isolated on the ocean. Based on Michail Bakhtin's concept of prandial speech, Marais (2018) explains that the act of cooking and sharing food functions as forms of cultural interaction and communication. Food and eating are not only a biological necessity but also carry symbolic meanings that reflect social and cultural values. Furthermore, Pie's transformation from a vegetarian to a raw meat consumer reflects not only his struggle for survival but also his adaptation to new circumstances. This transformation, besides representing Pie's personal experience, it becomes a means by which he expresses his psychological and spiritual development.

Similarly, Martel strengthens readers' engagement through imagery, careful diction, and humor. Pie's humorous interactions with the two Mr. Kumars and his repeated attempts to teach his classmates the right pronunciation of his name create intimate emotional moments between the reader and the narrator and simultaneously highlights themes of identity and self-definition (Martel, 2001). Additionally, the novel's descriptive imagery in the depiction of the Algae Island that initially appears wonderful and comforting, but gradually shows its hidden

danger, enhances both tension ,wonder, and the instability of truth (Marais,2018).Besides, the novels allegorical and symbolic dimensions are reinforced by Martel's use of precise terminology and animal behaviour that contribute significantly to the realism of the narrative(Xu,2017).

Narrative Ambiguity and Performative Storytelling in *Life of Pie*

As previously discussed, a central feature of *Life of Pie* is its engagement with narrative ambiguity and its revelation through multiple perspectives, both contributing significantly in adapting the novel for theatrical performance. Rather than offering one authoritative version of truth, the author presents two accounts of Pie's survival story after the shipwreck: the fantastical narrative of animals involving the Bengal tiger, Richard Parker, and the more realistic and violent story of humans narrated to the Japanese investigators. Critics describe this duality as "double narrative" in which the process of storytelling itself becomes the main focus of interpretation. Bogar and szigethy(2022) demonstrate, the novel proves that stories are not objective representations of reality, rather, they are imagined, selected, constructed, and believed. Consequently, readers and stage audiences are encouraged to participate actively in interpretation, consideration of credibility, and performative act of storytelling.

The metafictional narrative structure further enhances the novel's ambiguity. Martel introduces an authorial figure resembling himself as an extradiegetic narrator. This author frames Pie's story as truthful account discovered through research and interviews ,thus deliberately blurring the line between reality and fiction that encourages readers to question the reliability of the narrative. In understanding this structure, Gerard Genet's distinction between the extradiegetic and intradiegetic narration are highly helpful. While the extradiegetic author exists outside the main story, Pie occupies the homodiegetic level in narrating his own experiences within the narrative itself. In this complex narrative structure, truth becomes insecure and filtered through different voices and perspectives. Such complexity offers great potential for theatrical adaptation as these narrative layers could be externalized through stage techniques such as doubling of roles, direct address, rapid shifts between visual and verbal storytelling, and voice- over narration (Bogar and Szigethy).

Besides its metafictional qualities, the novel engages with and at the same time subverts the castaway-survival traditional narrative associated with works such as *Robinson Crusoe*. *Life of Pie* resembles Daneil Defoe's classic novel in dealing with isolation, endurance, and survival against overwhelming odds. Nevertheless, Martel complicates through postmodern "self-reflexivity and trauma". The survival story acts as a structural backbone, while the instability of Pie's narration is objectively unreliable from the part of reader. Readers may understand the story as a psychological strategy of coping with the trauma. This postmodern narrative strategy strengthens the adaptability of the text as theatrical performance depends on illusion, representation, and audience participation interpretation. In addition to that , the narrative functions as identity formation in Pie's decision to rename himself. Originally named Piscine Molitor Patel, he shortens his name to Pie to avoid ridicule and to redefine his identity. Pie's act of new-naming demonstrate how language can shape identity. Within the adaptation process, this moment can be acted through performance. In this sense the novel aligns with postmodern theories of identity that consider the self as "fluid ,constructed, and dependent upon narrative representation" (Bogar and Szigethy,2022).

Narrative ambiguity is further intensified by Pie's first-person narration which continually shifts between his direct experience recollective reflection. Xu(2017) points out that this oscillation creates uncertainty about the reliability of Pie's story because readers can not be entirely convinced if the events are remembered accurately, his imaginative creation, or he deliberately alter the events. Surreal events such as pie's initial misperceptions of Richard Parker's presence on the lifeboat, the carnivorous island inhabited by meerkats, and the blind

French castaway whom Pie suddenly encounter ;destabilize the distinction between reality and imagination. These episodes challenge rational understanding and invite readers to make allegorical and symbolic interpretations. Martel intentionally preserves these ambiguities throughout the novel to break the limitations of objective truth and allow for psychological elucidations as a necessity for storytelling.

The third-person narrative introduced by the Japanese investigators transcripts, enhances the epistemological structure of the novel. Unlike Pie's imaginative recount, the investigators provide rational order to the story through documentary evidence and factual questioning. However, this objective framework

Can not definitely ensure the truth as the investigators themselves choose the animal story over the realistic one. Xu(2017) argues that this conclusion which ends up with tension between two competing narratives generates epistemological uncertainty which is a feature of postmodern fiction.

These narrative features offer rich opportunities for theatrical adaptation. As the novel offer more than one single interpretation, this ambiguity could be dramatized externally through a wide range of performative and visual strategies. Dialogue, sound, lighting, movements, and spatial transformation may all participate in externalizing Pie's emotional and psychological conditions thereby transforming the layered narrative, metafictional frame, and shifting perspectives into a performative and sensory experience. Through such techniques, audiences are allowed to engage actively in interpreting the story rather than passively accepting a singular truth. Thus *Life of Pie* foregrounds the transformative power of storytelling reinforcing its role in understanding, perception, and identity shaping. The novel's narrative structure is central in meaning-making. Pie's narrative allows him to organize his traumatic experience into a meaningful structure highlighting the power of stories in mediating human responses to fear, suffering, and uncertainty. These qualities are inherently performative and adaptable to the stage as the theatre is dependent on the collective belief between audience and performers (Bogar and Szigethy, 2022).

Ultimately, the novel's use of narrative multiplicity, performativity, and uncertainty establishes *Life of Pie* as a text whose main dramaturgical concern is not merely a story of survival, but the act of narration itself. Although the survival story provides the narrative framework, greater focus is positioned on how stories are constructed, communicated, and interpreted. In this sense the novel shifts attention from factual accuracy to the process of story making. Consequently, both readers and audiences are encouraged to consider the ethics of belief and the interplay between imagination and reality, making of *Life of Pie* an influential source for literary and theatrical exploration.

3. Internal Focalization and Theatrical Adaptation in *Life of Pie*

Yan Martel's *Life of Pie* (2001) is a significantly layered narrative that explores themes of faith, survival, truth, and storytelling through the experiences of Pie Patel, a sixteen-year-old boy who, after surviving a shipwreck, finds himself stranded in the Pacific Ocean with a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. Besides its philosophical concerns, religious themes, and postmodern narrative structure, the novel is also much discussed in its complicated ways of constructing diverse perspectives and in guiding readers' engagement with the story. The novel does not simply recount a sequence of events, but constantly calls attention for the process through which these events are remembered, imagined, told, interpreted, and believed. Consequently, readers are invited to generate a relationship between reality and representation and actively construct meaning.

A core element of Martel's narrative complexity is his use of multiple narrative levels and tightly controlled focalization. Through a combination of a framing device, embedded narratives, and shifting perspectives, the story creates a narrative web that challenges the

conventional structure, and at the same time provide a case study in examining focalization because the readers access to the events of the the story are determined by Pie's perspective. At the extradiegetic level, the novel opens with an authorial note that frames Pie's story as a discovered truth. Within this frame the fictionalized author blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, presenting the narrative as an authentic testimony and simultaneously stresses its constructed nature " a story that will make you believe in God" (Martel,2001,p.x). In this sense the author's note functions as a metafictional strategy that establishes interpretive uncertainty from the beginning. This narrative technique is intended by Martel to invite readers to question the reliability of narration and the processes through which stories are validated. Intradiegetic level compromises primarily Pie's first-person narration in recounting his childhood in Pondicherry, his experiences in his family zoo, his spiritual formation, and the traumatic event post the sinking of Tsimtsum. Metadiegetic level includes Pie's two survival narratives: the fantastical animal story and the brutal human-centered account presented to the Japanese Officials close the novel's end. This narrative strategy exemplifies Gerard Genette's theory of levels of discourse. The author is present outside the story world yet able to shape readers' understanding of Pie's story as both believable and incredible. As a result, readers enter the world of the story already aware that storytelling is as crucial as the thematic concern.

Pie's narration is highly subjective and internally focalized. According to Genette (1980) internal focalization refers to the narrative perspective that is restricted to the consciousness of a specific character. In this sense, Pie is both narrator and focalizer. Events of the story are filtered through his emotions, perceptions, and interpretations compelling readers to understand the world not objectively but through his lens. His psychological and emotional state intensively shape the narrative. As a result the narrative becomes more concerned with his experiential truth than the objective truth.

Moreover, Pie's perceptions of the world are profoundly influenced by his religious pluralism, emotional resilience, and imaginative faculties. An obvious example is his repeated anthropomorphizing of Richard Parker when he attributes human emotions and intentions to him:

"Another favourite position of his was sitting with his back to me....locking as if we were playing hide-and-seek and he were the one counting" (Martel,2001,p.168).

Here, Richard Parker is the focalized object filtered through Pie's imagination. This description of the tiger reveals Pie's need for a companion. So through this internal focalization, readers perceive the tiger as a real threat and a mirror of his psychological mechanisms for survival. Bal's theory explains that the meaning generates not only from the focalized object " the tiger" but from the relationship between the focalizer and the focalized.

Similarly, the Pacific Ocean is a vital space for internal focalization. Pie's depiction of the ocean reflects his experiences at sea , shifting between moments of intensive hardship and moments of relative calm. At times, he describes the sea with awe and admiration "the sea was as smooth as glass, and as blue as gems" (Martel,2001,p.222). He further reflects on its remarkable beauty "it was an immense circle of steep water hills all around me" (Martel,2001,p.215).

At some other times, sea becomes destructive and terrifying. For example in a moment of violent storm he comments " the blackness would stir and eventually go away, and in its place there would be a white explosion of foam" (Martel,2001,p.233). Besides showing his fear and vulnerability, he also comments on his isolation when he states "to be a castaway is to be caught in a prolonged crisis with dwindling resources" (Martel,2001,p.161).

These opposing representations illustrate that the sea is never presented objectively but through Pie's focalization which in turn shapes the reader's understanding of the ocean as both

a source of wonder and a source of danger , isolation, and destruction. Thus, in line with Micke Bal's theory, the ocean is the focalized object , while Pie functions as the focalizer whose emotional and psychological states organize the narrative meaning.

Moreover, Pie's focalization govern the ethical and philosophical dimensions of the story. He functions as a focalizes in his two survival stories, the animal version, and the human-centered version, while the events are differently. In the animal story, trauma is focalized through symbolism and imagination, whereas the human story focalizes brutality and violence explicitly. In this way readers confront the instability of the truth .This ambiguity as Kumari (2017) states, is enhanced through postmodern techniques ,such as fragmented temporality, metafiction, and nested diegesis. These shifts disrupt the linear narrative and emphasize the constructed nature of storytelling.

Pie's careful attention to the details of survival ,including recording lifeboat's supplies, rationing of water and food , and observing Richard Parker's behaviour supports the narrative's realism despite the extraordinary circumstances. In contrast, his interviews with the Japanese investigators complicate the narrative as Martel positions readers between two conflicting narrative modes encouraging them to think that all narratives including the true ones are constructed realities. Pillay(2015) argues, Pie's story alternates between contemplative prose, transcript-like interactions with Japanese investigators, and existential reflection enhancing the "epistemological tension between belief and skepticism, imagination and survival".

In adapting Martel's complex narrative for stage, Lolita Chakrabarti proves that internal focalization and intricate layered story can be externalized through theatrical means and performative language of theatre while preserving the philosophical and emotional essence of the novel. As Hutcheon (2006) claims adaptations are not derivative but "creative and interpretive transpositions" shaped by the affordances of their new medium(p.8). Rather than attempting to reproduce Martel's metafictional techniques directly, Chakrabarti reimagines them to fit into the theatre-medium specific strategies including lighting ,puppetry, ensemble movement, projections ,and dynamic set design(Biraia,2022).

As previously noted, *Life of Pie* begins with an extradiegetic level that adds a metafictional mode to the narrative. In the stage adaptation, the extradiegetic framing is altered into a theatrical diegetic space of a hospita-room scene in Mexico (after his survival), where Pie is directly recounting his survival story to the Japanese Officials starting with:

"I will tell you everything.....because my story will make you believe in God"(Chacrabarti,2021,p.3).

This declaration from Pie establishes storytelling as theatrical performance which situates audiences physically within the act of testimony. Unlike the novel, where readers access Pie's consciousness through language and textual mediation, spectators witness him when reliving and performing his memory in real time. Thus ,Pie simultaneously functions as performer, narrator, and focalizer . Besides ,focalization becomes not only linguistic but also sensory and spatial.

This transformation exemplifies Hutcheon's argument that adaptations must establish "palpable links"with the source while also exploiting the sensory immediacy of live performance. Chacrabarti achieves this balance through focalization and staging.

Flashbacks are performed live to enable audience witness Pie's childhood experiences including: his relationship with his family members and religious figures, his interactions with zoo animals, the sinking of the Tsimtsum, and the subsequent survival trauma(The Arts Fuse,2025). In this way, memory becomes visible and sensory through soundscapes, lighting transition, ensemble movement, and visual symbolism. Another most significant devise used in translating focalization theatrically is puppetry. The tiger is manipulated lifelike in breathing,

movement, and aggression by three puppeteers (Times Union, 2025,p.5;Rhetorical Review,2025,p.12).Importantly, the puppetry does not merely represent an animal but externalizes Pie's psychological state.The audience live Pie's fear,dependence, companionship,ethical dilemmas, and survival through Richard Parker's performative presence.This theatrical presentation remains fundamentally focalized through Pie's experience, aligning the audiences' perception of his internal conflicts as a focalizer (Brennan,2025,p.8).Similarly, other animals are portrayed through puppetry and ensemble performance manifesting Pie's wonder and curiosity visually and kinesthetically (EW.com,2025,p.4)

Chakrabarti's adaptation of Life of Pie also preserves the novel's ambiguity regarding the two versions of narrative.He explicitly declares the duality of his survival story:

"You can't prove which story is true.But in both stories the ship sinks, my family dies and I suffer"(Chakarabarti,2021,p.72).

In the novel readers are provided with detailed textual narration of the two survival stories.On the stage, these two versions need to be reimagined through theatrical aesthetics including puppetry, lighting, and ensemble performance to create different emotional registers of the two versions allowing to audience to confront simultaneously the emotional truth and factual uncertainty of Pie's testimony.This ambiguity aligns strongly with Genette's(1980) theory of narrative mediation and Hutcheon's(2006) notion of "repetition without replication".Chakrabarti preserves the novel's core idea of uncertainty while rearticulating it through theatre.Theatrical focalization ,therefore, enhances the spectator's emotional and ethical engagement with Pie's psychological journey through live performance .

Pie's spiritual and philosophical reflections are also adapted through focalization.His statement "Atheists are believers of a different faith.It's agnostics I don't understand"(Chakrabarti,2021,p.43).while in novel these musings are revealed linguistically, they are visualized to body gestures, props, and movements.Entertainment Weekly describes the play as an" imaginative and powerful stage adaptation" arguing that the production transforms Pie's spirituality into performative dramatic and visual structures.Times Union argues that "questions of faith and belief" are interwoven throughout the production, stressing the centrality of faith within the adaptation.Furthermore,Andrezej Lukowski: in a review in Time Out; "describes the play as "visually stunning" enhancing the role of stagecraft in externalizing Pie's religious and spiritual consciousness.

Additionally, the adaptation foregrounds memory and imagination in fluid transitions between reality and abstraction.Pie recounts his memories in the zoo in dialogues:

"Once upon a time, I lived in Pondicherry's botanical gardens in the zoo... big enough for a train to explore but now it fits in my head"(Chakrabarti,2021,p.12).Here ,the stage becomes a space where reality and imagination, past and present , coexist .Pie directly invites his audience to share his fears, hopes, and uncertainties in the real time.

Moments of extreme suffering and endurance are conveyed through Pie's subjective perspective.His declaration "So is winning the lottery but someone always wins"(Chakrabarti,2021,p.88), conveys his psychological negotiation of improbable survival.The statement emerges during Pie's struggle for survival and his attempt to impose meaning in extreme misery . In the novel ,these moments are revealed through internal narration. In the adaptation ,they are immediately dramatized inviting audience engagement. Pie recounts his hardships while acting them.Theatrically ,surviving becomes an ongoing experience not merely a narrative information.The audience perceive the ordeal through Pie's perspective which strongly aligns with Bal's distinction between the focalizer(who perceives) and focalized(what perceived).

Stage direction function as a central means of externalizing and condensing the narrative. Chakrabarti frequently compresses long complex emotional or descriptive information into dramatical strategies. This is evident in the scene when Pie realizes a ship far away from his lifeboat:

The ship a mile high black wall, just misses the lifeboat but overturns the rain catchers. The waves rock the life boat and the oars, the net and ration box fall out it is a devastating sight. (Chakrabarti, 2021, p.55)

This stage direction condenses one of the very exiting moments of the novel. such moments are conveyed through extended narratives and reflective commentary. Thus stage direction is not only a technical instruction, but also a narrative mechanism that theatricalizes profound narratives. Hutcheon's theory of adaptation is significantly relevant here, as the playwright reshapes the narrative according to the demands of theatre.

Finally, the adaptation preserves Martel's central epistemological question to the Japanese Officials concerning narrative belief, truth, and preference. Pie's concludes "A story with animals is the better story. And so it goes with God" (Martel, 2001, p.317). Chakrabarti maintains this argument within the dramatic adaptation in a theatrical dialogue with the officials:

Pie: So tell me which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?

Mr Okamoto: That is an interesting question.

Lulu: The story with animals.

Mr Okamoto: Yes the story with animals is the better story.

Pie: Yes. Thank you... And so it goes with God. (Chakrabarti, 2021, p.71)

This exchange illustrate Hutcheon's argument that adaptations are creative reinterpretations shaped according to the possibilities of the new medium, thereby achieving a double function of fidelity to the thematic essence of the source text and creative transformation determined by the semiotics of the new medium.

4. Spirituality, Symbolism, and Survival

Life of Pie explores survival in a deep and intricate connection with spirituality. Pie's physical struggle with death is inseparable from his endurance of suffering, fear, and isolation. It is obvious that Martel believes that faith is as a vital power as the practical skills and physical strength are in moments of crisis.

This constructed body of intertwined spirituality and physicality, moves *Life of Pie* beyond the conventions of the traditional adventure narrative and becomes a unique philosophical reflection of belief, strength, and resilience.

From an early age, Pie engages with Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, believing in the divine truth of each tradition. His attraction to multiple religions reflects a broader search for the emotional and metaphysical meaning of each of them, especially regarding suffering, existence, and the nature of God (Gorshin, 2025). Early in the novel, Martel presents this spiritual openness as an essential aspect of Pie's character as it demonstrates his later experiences. Religion for Pie is not a merely ritualistic practice, but it is a means of emotional and intellectual engagement of life. This becomes crucial after the shipwreck. Alone on the Pacific Ocean on a lifeboat, surrounded by wild animals, Pie turns to prayer as a source of persistence "Faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust" (Martel, 2001, p.205). Faith enables him to resist despair and maintain hope despite the chaos and fear surrounding him daily.

Martel complicates the idea of survival by displaying it as a transformative experience. Rather than physical resistance for existence, In *Life of Pie*, extreme circumstances force Pie to adapt morally and psychologically. At the beginning, the Bengal tiger represents fear and danger, reminding Pie of death at every moment "I must say a word about fear. It is life's only true

.Only fear can defeat life”(Martel,2001,p.161). However,as time passes, Richard Parker becomes a driving force for Pie’s survival because caring for him gives Pie a sense of discipline and purpose.The existence of the tiger motivates Pie to remain mentally alert ,emotionally engaged, and at the same time prevents him from hopelessness .He himself acknowledges his dependence when he states “The presence of Richard Parker kept me alive” (Martel,2001,p.164) .Pie also admits “ Apart of me did not want Richard Parker to die at all, because if he died , I would be left alone with despair.A foe even more formidable than a tiger ” (Martel,2001,p.204).The tiger, therefore symbolizes not only danger but also companionship and emotional continuity. Their coexistence exemplify the negotiation between fear and respect,savagery and humanity, and instinct and civilization.Pie realizes that survival depends on coexistence not on domination ,explaining “It was not a question of him or me.It was a question of him and me”(Martel,2001,p.182).Thus the necessity for feeding the tiger creates a daily routine that prevents Pie from collapsing into passivity and despair.

This transformation is also evident in Pie’s association with consumption and violence.His actions, including killing fish, hunting sea turtles, and consuming raw meat signal a painful departure from his vegetarian innocent early life to a pragmatic resilience.Pi painfully admits “I descended to a level of savagery I never imagined possible”(Martel,2001,p.225). Yet, Martel does not depict these actions as moral degradation, but like adaptative survival necessities(Li,2024).It is worth mentioning that Pie ritualizes these acts of killing and eating , often approaching them with prayer, reverence, or guilt.He states “ I practised religious rituals ,which I adapted to the conditions”(Martel,2001,p.208).These moments suggest that spirituality survives alongside Pie’s instinct and never vanish completely.Furthermore, Pie’s preparation and consumption of food reflect symbolic significance as they deepen the novel’s philosophical dimensions.This evokes Bakhtin’s notion of “prandial speech” in which eating becomes associated with dialogue, creativity, and transformation (Bakhtin,2009; Dodeman,2014).In this sense ,food transcends physical necessity and becomes a cultural and spiritual performance.Thus , Martel transforms the body survival into a symbolic act through which culture, morality, and spirituality are creatively bargained .Amid the dehumanizing conditions of the Pacific Ocean, Pie with his rituals preserves fragments of civilization.

Hybridity is also closely connected to the theme of survival in *Life of Pie* because survival depends not only on coexistence and adaptation to new conditions, but on Pie’s cultural awareness as well.Pie’s hybrid religious identity which shaped through Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam provides him with emotional strength and spiritual stability when isolated at sea. His knowledge of multiple beliefs and modes of behaviour allow him to reconstruct meaning in the face of trauma.

Martel further develops survival through imagery,humor, and linguistic precision.Humor is not employed merely for entertainment but as a means by which Pie would be able to soften the intensity of his traumatic experiences.His playful childhood training of peers to pronounce his name as “Pi Patel” instead of “Piscine Moliter Patel” reflect his determination to protect his identity through language. He often writes on his classroom blackboard “Pie=3.14” in an attempt to reconstruct himself through creativity.This episode illustrates Pie’s ability to escape the ridicule associated with his name wittily through language of mathematics Likewise, his interactions with both Mr. Komars ,one a devout Muslim baker, and the other his biology teacher, symbolize the coexistence of faith and science within him.Pie comments on their fascination with the zoo animals ,while visiting his family zoo “ both were so very Indian in the way they were gentlemen and cultured and curious and knowledgeable” (Martel,2001,p.89).This blending of wit and philosophical reflection in Pie as Bogar and Szigethy (2022) state, reveal the power of storytelling in his self-definition and survival.

Martel's use of vivid imagery also enhances the novel's emotional and symbolic depth. Pie's description of the algae island initially as a paradise, offering nourishment and safety, then as carnivorous symbolizes the nature duality as both beautiful and destructive. Moreover, Pie describes the Ocean in different perspectives as both beautiful and terrifying. Once he states "an infinite ocean of blinding light" (Martel, 2001, p. 216). Another time as "The sea is emotion incarnate" (Martel, 2001, p. 225). These contradictory statements symbolize Pie's psychological and emotional states. Thus, the imagery creates this fragile balance awe and terror suggesting that survival is dependent on man's ability to confront both the beauty and brutality of nature.

Moreover, Martel's precise vocabulary adds a sense of realism and intellectual depth to the story. Pie's detailed accounts of animal behaviour, zoology, navigation, and survival techniques lends credibility to the narrative and create the impression of authentic documentaries. Pie explains animals psychology with confidence stating "animals have an instinctive tendency to occupy a territory" (Martel, 2001, p. 49). Likewise, he notes "a well administered zoo is a highly satisfying place for animals to live" (Martel, 2001, p. 19) demonstrating a wide scientific understanding of animals and zoology. The text's realism is further reinforced through Pie's technical descriptions of survival practices and his methods of endurance. In describing one of his moments with Richard Parker, he states "I had to tame. It was at that moment that I realized this necessity" (Martel, 2001, 187). He practices similar practical survival strategies while fishing, navigating, rationing, and consequently enriching the narrative with plausibility and order.

Finally, the narrative's linguistic richness enhances the themes of survival and spirituality through storytelling. Pie explains the importance of narrative in shaping belief suggesting that faith and imagination are important methods of survival. His assertion that the best story is the one with animals highlights the novel's concern with belief and spiritual meaning rather than absolute truth. Rather than presenting survival as preserving physical life, Martel suggests other possible methods of survival like hope, faith, and stories as strategies of coping with uncertainty. Through Pie's imaginative story, survival is transformed into a meaningful experience of suffering that establishes faith, hope, and storytelling as man's shields in the face of trauma.

Conclusion

This study has examined the narrative structure of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* and its transformation into Lolita Chakrabarti's theatrical adaptation through the perspectives of narratology and adaptation theory. The analysis demonstrates that the novel derives its dramatic potential not merely from its adventurous plot but from its sophisticated narrative organization, which combines layered narration, internal focalization, metafiction, and narrative ambiguity. These techniques enable the novel to move beyond a conventional survival story and become an exploration of storytelling, faith, identity, trauma, and human resilience.

The study further reveals that Chakrabarti successfully reinterprets these narrative mechanisms through theatrical conventions rather than attempting to reproduce them literally. By employing framing scenes, dialogue, puppetry, stage directions, visual symbolism, movement, lighting, and spatial design, the adaptation translates the novel's internal narrative processes into performative forms while preserving its philosophical and emotional depth. Consequently, the adaptation illustrates Linda Hutcheon's view that successful adaptations are creative reinterpretations shaped by the possibilities of a new medium.

Overall, the findings confirm that *Life of Pi* possesses an inherently theatrical narrative structure whose layered perspectives and emphasis on storytelling facilitate its successful transition from novel to stage. The study therefore demonstrates that narrative structure is a decisive factor in determining the theatrical adaptability of literary texts and highlights the

value of combining narratological analysis with adaptation theory in the study of contemporary theatre.

Findings

The study reached the following findings:

1. The multilayered narrative structure of *Life of Pi* is fundamental to its thematic and dramatic complexity.
2. Genette's theory of narrative levels effectively explains the relationship between the novel's framing narrative and Pi's embedded narration.
3. Internal focalization allows readers to experience events through Pi's psychological and emotional perspective, making his perception central to narrative meaning.
4. Narrative ambiguity functions as a major structural principle that encourages multiple interpretations rather than presenting a single objective truth.
5. Storytelling operates as both a narrative technique and a psychological strategy through which Pi reconstructs identity, trauma, faith, and survival.
6. Chakrabarti's adaptation preserves the novel's narrative complexity while transforming literary narration into theatrical performance through medium-specific devices.
7. Puppetry, stage directions, visual symbolism, flashbacks, and framing scenes successfully externalize the novel's internal focalization and psychological dimensions.
8. The adaptation maintains the philosophical themes of faith, survival, identity, and truth while exploiting the unique expressive resources of live theatre.
9. Hutcheon's theory of adaptation and Genette's narratology together provide an effective theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between narrative form and theatrical adaptation.
10. The study confirms that the adaptability of *Life of Pi* depends primarily on its narrative architecture rather than on its plot alone, demonstrating that narrative structure plays a central role in determining the theatrical potential of contemporary novels.

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