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REVISIONING LEVINAS FOR POSTMODERN HOLINESS: LIFE OF PI AS AN EXEMPLAR

ABSTRACT: The dominant contemporary western philosophical systems like poststructuralism reject essences and values, at least in their extreme manifestation. The absence of values means the impossibility of ethics. Emmanuel Levinas’s celebrated ethical vision, predicated on radical alterity, seeks to restore moral obligation to the postmodern world. The foundation of Levinas’s ethics is an individual’s infinite responsibility for the other. However, the other in Levinas is exclusively human. This paper argues that Levinasian ethical thought should be revisioned to include the nonhuman as well; for a comprehensive ethical framework that valorises the human and the nonhuman other as equal partners alone will ensure a sustainable universe. Life of Pi is an exemplar narrative, despite Levinas’s own antipathy towards stories, that shows the Levinasian ethics of relatedness in action. This novel thus is both a critique of, and a complement to, the Levinasian vision.

KEYWORDS: Levinasian ethics, ecology, Life of Pi, antihumanism

0. LEVINAS AND POSTMODERN ECOLOGY

Perhaps the core of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas can best be termed as “one’s absolute responsibility for the other,” where the other unequivocally stands for human beings. Hence Levinasian ethics, with some qualification, can be designated as ‘humanist.’ Yet the label ‘humanist’ in the period during and after the second half of the 20th century is not altogether laudatory. For the Enlightenment humanist project, generally believed to be an offshoot of the Cartesian cogito, stands discredited consequent on the rude jolt administered by the antiessentialist and antihumanist poststructuralist upsurge. Human centrality was problematised and sidelined in the new philosophies contemporaneous with the Levinasian humanist approach. Vigorous ecological concerns, following upon the heels of these philosophies, have not been comfortable with the exclusionary focus on ‘man’, due to the
growing realization of the interdependence of the human and the nonhuman spheres. Deep ecologists justly accuse the ‘environmentalists’ of being narcissistically obsessed more with future ‘human’ welfare than with the happiness of all. For environment, for the human, is invariably taken to be human-centred.

Consequent on the realization of the unviability of an exclusionary humanist approach, there is a pressing need for a vision that determines the ethical status of the nonhuman. The world, it seems, is in want of an ethical vision that valorizes the nonhuman, as the Levinasian approach is rather heavily inclined to the human. This paper hazards a possible revisioning of the celebrated Levinasian thought for an inclusionary approach to the human and the nonhuman.

The nondualist philosophies of South Asia, in all likelihood, sprang from the realization of the danger of the growing wedge between the human and the nonhuman in the wake of the transition to an agricultural and urbanized economy from a hunting-gathering mode of life. South Asian religions of both theistic or atheistic persuasions, in their attempts to restore the interdependence, seem to have generally stressed the essential unity of all life. However, no dispensation that holds out deliverance (moksha) as the ultimate end can consider the nonhuman at par. A viable philosophy is the one that valorizes the human and the nonhuman for the same reason, and that reason is none other than the continuity of life on earth. Any ethics worth its name should be geared to this end.

1. POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND DIEHARD HUMANISM

Poststructuralism in its unqualified version, by its celebration of the death or end of a host of entities such as God, author, philosophy, man and humanism, professes to valorize nothing. Yet, understandably, man and humanism refuse to be silenced, because of either their desirability, or more probably their inevitability. The avowed antihumanist project of poststructuralism ended up largely as a paean to the humanist creed in terms of gender, race, class, and special interests. A humanist ethical turn, if in different forms, is insistent in leading poststructuralist thinkers

2. THE ‘OTHER’ IN LEVINAS

When Levinas in his *Basic philosophical writings* states that “the relationship with the other puts me into question, empties me of myself” (1996:350), or when Jill Robbins says that Levinas’s ethics works essentially by “putting into question the self by the infinitizing mode of the face of the other” (p. xiii), the terms ‘self’ and ‘other’ in the citations are all too definitively and exclusively human. Hence Levinas’s ethics, predicated on one’s infinite responsibility to the other, stresses an individual’s inherent responsibility to the unviolable and irreducible face of the human other.

Levinas contradictorily is a humanist par excellence by transcending humanism, for he considers traditional humanism less than human: it “has to be denounced because it is not sufficiently human” (1998:128), and it has not adequately taken care of the human. Without making a simplistic return to enlightenment humanism, and steering clear of the foundationalism of the sovereign subject, Levinas sets out to restore the subjectivity that has been refused by the juggernaut of the poststructuralist upsurge. In his preface to *Totality and infinity*, Levinas spells out his aim as “a defence of subjectivity . . . as founded in the idea of infinity” (1969:26). To that extent Levinas may be moving against the currents of poststructuralism as well as traditional humanism in certain significant aspects. As all ethics is predicated on value and some sort of subjectivity, the Levinasian subject is defined by its exposure to an irreducible alterity. It is also a fractured subjectivity aware of its “infinite responsibility to the other person” and the impossible demand made on it.
by the other. Levinas goes on to say in his preface: “subjectivity realizes these impossible demands: the astonishing fact of containing more than it is possible to contain. This book will present subjectivity as welcoming the other, as hospitality” (1969:27). In this originary relatedness, choice is possible but forbidden.

2.1 The dynamics of Levinasian ethics

In the awareness of its exposure to the other, the self-contained sovereign self disappears. There is a disowning of the ego. In “Meaning and Sense,” Levinas says that in such moments of exposure to the other, “the I loses its sovereign self-confidence, its identification in which consciousness returns triumphantly to itself to rest on others. Before the exigency of the other (*Autrui*), the I is expelled from this rest . . .” (1996:54). Levinas rejects the authority of philosophy that appraises others by imposing meaning through representational structures and by attempting to speak for the other, because it works by reducing the other and hence employing violence against the other. Authentic ethics for Levinas precedes ontology and philosophy. The other in Levinas is the ‘epiphany’ of the human face which cannot be refused and which clamours for attention: “This gaze that supplicates and demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything” (1969:75). Notably, Levinas’s ethics refuses to range beyond the human realm.

2.2 The nonhuman in Levinas

The nonhuman animal, in the Levinasian oeuvre, receives little attention as a subject unworthy, as it were, of profounder analysis. Small organisms, plants and the nonsentient kingdom are given still less attention, so one gets the feeling that Levinas is unwilling to include animals, let alone plants and the inorganic world in his ethical sphere. Significantly, his attitude to the nonhuman animal can be gathered from the interview given to Tamra Wright et al. and from the essay “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights.”

“The Name of a Dog” is an anecdote concerning a stray dog named Bobby that became Levinas’s friend for a few days during Levinas’s and his fellow Jews’ stint as prisoners of war in Nazi Germany. Bobby’s
behaviour in recognizing their humanity, a gesture that was not forthcoming from their masters, is almost described as ethical: “For him, — It was incontestable — we were men” (1990:153). Yet the dog is not accorded any ethical status. In his *Collected Philosophical Writings*, Levinas views nonhuman animals much like Descartes did, as live machines: “An animal is a machine not only because it does not know how to utilize its organs in polyvalent way, but because it is imprisoned in its constitution” (1987:122). The singular Levinasian human – nonhuman demarcation is to be “capable of living for the other” (1969:149), which the nonhuman is allegedly incapable of. Obviously, the same yardstick is applied to the human and the nonhuman, and here the human is not so much the Aristotelian–Cartesian ‘rational’ animal as a ‘relational’ animal. Rationality is downplayed: “Reason speaking in the first person is not addressed to the other, [it only] conducts a monologue” (1969:72). The ability to relate to the other is the distinguishing feature of the human according to Levinas. He says animals fare badly indeed in terms of the relationality benchmark.

Besides, the members of the nonhuman themselves are contra–distinguished on the basis of relationality. Levinas says, “Animal need is liberated from vegetable dependence, but this liberation is itself dependence and uncertainty. The need of a wild animal is inseparable from struggle and fear; the exterior world from which it is liberated remains a threat. But need is also the time of labor: a relation with an other yielding its alterity” (1969:116). Yet these strictures made on the non–human kingdom raise more questions than they answer. Is not the criterion of liberation from a “vegetable dependence,” which allegedly the human alone is capable of, indefensibly speciesist? If the nonhuman realm is, as it is alleged, inherently incapable of transcending the ‘vegetable dependence,’ isn’t humankind ethically obliged to them? Could the non–human, as opposed to the human, be considered as leading an unethical (= ethics-neutral) life? Is one species entitled to dictate an ethical code of conduct for another? Levinas’s thought tends towards a human exclusivity, as only the human other whose face is a face of deprivation demands obligation from us.
Regarding human and animal face, Levinas says, we “cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal.” For instance, a dog “also has a face” (1988:169). However, there is “priority” to a human face as an animal face is not in its “purest form.” According to Levinas, only human beings possess a face from an ethical perspective. About our obligations to animals, Levinas’s view is that “the ethical extends to all living beings,” the reason being that “we do not want to make an animal suffer needlessly.” The ability to suffer pain is a prerogative reserved to the higher order animals, even as one cannot pass over the ambiguity of the term “needlessly.”

2.3 Privileging the human

But why is humankind entitled to such precedence in ethics? Levinas feels that in the evolutionary stage, the human is the most advanced species, and this accords the human a special place in the scheme of life. He says, “the human is only the last stage of the evolution of the animal . . . (and) that in relation to the animal, the human is a new phenomenon” (1988:172). This evolutionary advancement, according to Levinas, was, by and large, a new unique ability to transcend one’s self and be related to the other. This singularizes the human. Levinas observes:

You ask at what moment one becomes a face. I do not know at what moment the human appears, but what I want to emphasize is that the human breaks in with pure being, which is always a persistence in being. This is my principal thesis. A being is something that is attached to being, to its own being. That is Darwin’s idea. The being of animals is a struggle for life. A struggle of life without ethics. It is a question of might . . . . The aim of being is being itself. However, with the appearance of the human, — and this is my entire philosophy — there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other. That is unreasonable. Man is an unreasonable animal. (1988:172).

The human indeed is unreasonable in the sense that it can go beyond the dictates of reason to prioritize the need of the other, though it is still an
act performed through the exercise of reason. More importantly, one wonders whether Levinas gives due acknowledgement to the common fountainhead of the evolutionary grid, of which the vaunted human faculties are but one element among a varied set of coordinates that informed the course of the progress of the cosmos. If the human is a new phenomenon, it probably is not the last of such phenomena because succeeding species have generally been dependent on all preceding genera and species. Levinas’s ethics does not seem to regard the possibility that the world of both human and nonhuman, reason or no reason, is subject to the more or less same ‘laws’ of the universe for eons, and that it has not only been a life of togetherness, now falling in, now falling out, now relational, now otherwise, but also that the nonhuman has been the condition for human life and prosperity, and which will presumably fuel further stages of evolutionary unfolding.

Besides, if indeed the “being of animals is a struggle for life” inherently, and human life is characterized by its relation to the ‘life of the other’ and if this is further held out as the basis of human superiority, how far can one escape the charge of genetic fallacy? Evidently, both are inherited features over which neither the human nor the non–human had any control. Moreover, whether the being of all the animals is a greater struggle for life than it is for human beings, with which the later discussion of Life of Pi in this paper is also concerned, needs more study. Numerous studies with varying degrees of conclusiveness have come in concerning animal love for the members of its own species, its own young ones, instances of selfless sacrifice for the members of its own species and for protecting the members of other species including the human. Unfortunately, the human can only work with anthropomorphic tools for analysis, in as much as the nonhuman approaches life with tools characteristic of them.

2.4 Locating the human in the evolutionary grid

The impulse to privilege the human over the nonhuman tapers off as the human is viewed in the cosmic evolutionary perspective of thousands of millennia. It is a commonplace that the earth and its contents have been shaped over billions of years, that humanity itself is nature-became-self-
conscious, and that the human complexity is a chronological step ahead of and predicated on animal innocence. Even a schoolboy knows that the earth itself is a puny planetary body, with the ‘great’ sun and other planets being but tiny outstations in our galaxy which itself is only a miniscule part of the yet uncharted cosmos.

Even as Levinas draws an absolute and unbridgeable ethical divide between the human and animal that subsumes all the nonhuman, it seems that in the evolutionary course of the human and nonhuman realms, dependency and complexity of being are directly proportional. The earlier evolutionary products are more self-reliant and hence less dependent on the later ones which owe their existence to the earlier ones. Humans, being the last comers and the most complex beings yet on the world stage, are nevertheless, and paradoxically, the most dependent on earlier evolutionary products, poorly acknowledged though this may be. Hence Levinas’s declaration that “the prototype of this [ethics] is human ethics” (1988:172), smacks, to say the least, of human chauvinism.

However, parallel to the biological evolutionary course, even the much prated human ethics appears to be predicated on the prehuman instinctual world. Nietzsche considers the entire morality as based on animality, and human as the intruder who has unlawfully appropriated the animal ethics: “(t)he beginnings of justice, as of prudence, moderation, bravery . . . are animals: a consequence of that drive which teaches us to seek food and elude enemies . . . it is not improper to describe the entire phenomenon of morality as animal (1997:26).” Besides, the human essence, if any, came to be defined in terms of animals: “The [human] envied the wildest, most courageous animals and robbed all their virtues; only thus did he become man.” (Nietzsche 1980: 6)

3. TOWARDS INTERDEPENDENCE

The awareness of the dependence of the human upon the nonhuman is attested by all traditional societies and is best illustrated in the aboriginal totem. Totemism, a vestige of paleolithic life and an anthropologist’s hobbyhorse, by its identification of a hunting-gathering clan with a species
of plant or animal, underscores its unity with the nonhuman. Totemic beliefs, a spin off from human intercourse with the nonhuman for ages, viewed nature as pulsating with life. Inorganic matter hardly existed. For most autochthonous societies, the human and the nonhuman realms were undifferentiated. Gary Snyder observes: “In Pueblo societies a kind of ultimate democracy is practiced. Plants and animals are also people, and, through certain rituals and dances, are given a place and a voice in the political discussions of the humans” (1974:104).

That the Biblical Fall is more an admonition about the dangers consequent on a turn from hunting-gathering to agriculture than any grave transgression of a theological command is no less platitudinous than the proposition that starvation, malnutrition, warfare and pestilence are traceable to agriculture and urbanization, which together, in turn, are traceable to the human-nonhuman rupture. Significantly, many major world religions make deliberate effort, if they have not indeed sprung up precisely for this purpose, to restore the organic human-nonhuman unity of the past. The nondual philosophy expatiated upon in the South Asian religions like Hinduism, the Buddhist denial of self and God, Jainist ahimsa or nonviolence have long been viewed as stricures against the attendant dangers of the human-nonhuman split. Even as these religions are wary about valuing the nonhuman for its intrinsic and ultimate worth, the sacrality of the nonhuman has been fundamental to them. No wonder, all enduring spiritual postures have had an abiding material underpinning that seeks to ensure the best quality of life to everyone. Christianity may fare rather poorly when it comes to everyone.

In the paleolithic phase the humans were neither specially privileged nor separate from the rest of nature that was thought to be alive and filled with spirits. In such an equitable dispensation, hierarchization was uncalled for. Many scholars have referred to the paleolithic belief in a “primeval kinship with all creatures of the living world and to the essential continuity among them all” (Oelschlaeger 1999:103). A sense of shared essence among all creatures marked the prehistoric era which believed that the external forms of different species were interchangeable. The living organism of the world, as Luckert says, “includes all that grows and all that moves about in air and sky, on earth, below the earth, and in the sea;
it includes even the gods and the ever bearing earth in her totality” (quoted in *The idea of wilderness* by Oelschlaeger, p.13). The immanent gods of prehistory were supplanted by the transcendent ones only in the agricultural era. In South Asia, the resistance against the Vedic transcendent deities by Jaina and Buddhist thought may be seen largely as an attempt to resituate humanity back in this world. Yet, as they passionately and ultimately sought liberation from the world, which to them was a bondage of sorts debunked the inferior status accorded to the nonhuman in such worldviews.

4. REVISIONING LEVINAS

The turn from hunting-foraging to agriculture dealt a lasting and lethal blow to the human-nonhuman communion. Agriculture drew the boundary between national and cultural; it made distinctions between fields and forests, seedlings and weeds, crops and wilderness, the domestic and the wild. The interdependence got easily snapped as the produce in agriculture was viewed as one acquired through the sweat of the human brow rather than the bounty of the earth. Max Oelschlaeger refers to the inevitability of philosophy and theology in the new epoch: “Once the agricultural turn was made, philosophy and theology sprang forth with a vengeance” (1999:29). Significantly, it is with the emergence of agriculture, with its attendant philosophy and theology, that the appraisal of the nonhuman occurs with abandon, and humanization enters centrestage with a bang. If anything, Levinas was against such a philosophic violence of valuing the other. As Levinas puts it: “The relation between the other and me, which dawns forth in his expression, issues neither in number or concept” (1969:194). Levinas rejects the violence in conceptualizing and philosophizing the other. Levinas’s ethics is basically a relationship with a face of the other. “For Levinas, to decode the face in the manner of other signs would be to reduce it violently, to turn it – horribly, into a mask” (Robbins 1999:60). The pre-philosophic enterprise that ethics is for Levinas, the paleolithic interdependence of the human and nonhuman may seem to best approximate such an ethical relation. With a little oversimplification, one might say that the paleolithic ethics
was not only pre-ontological, which stressed the responsibility for the other (human and nonhuman) by facing the other, but a performative as well.

A restoration of the communion and sacrality of the paleoecologic paradigm being well-nigh impossible, the feasibility of a postmodern hierophany is an option open to humans. This requires the dawn of a new awareness in humans that they are: a consequence of the world rather than its cause; not being but becoming; not the privileged children created in the image of a god but just one among numerous coordinates of creative evolutionary process; rather than arbiters of value on all others, they are a spin-off in the grid of value coordinates themselves. Humans cannot delude themselves that creative evolution is for them or that they mark the consummation of the universe, instead, they should realize the plurality of becoming in which everyone has a vital, if not equal stake. As life on earth is viewed as a joint venture, the exclusionary humanist posture will give way to the restitution of interdependence and sacrality of the nonhuman.

Levinas’s ethics, predicated exclusively on the human other, therefore, breaks at its centre as it cannot take the weight of the nonhuman. A host of awareness programmes on environmental ethics is more symptomatic of the malaise than remedy, for any division into human ethics, animal ethics, environmental ethics and so on, is nothing short of a tyranny of the humanized ethics. Only a comprehensive ethics based on the creative evolution of becoming in the cosmic stage is the answer because we live in a reciprocally constituted existential realm. Before looking into the possibility of such a postmodern sacrality and interdependence in Yann Martel’s novel *Life of Pi*, a few remarks on Levinas’s views on literature are in place.

## 5. LEVINAS AND LITERATURE

There is a definitive antipathy to art and literature in Levinas’s ethics, as he considers art and literature a representation of ontology as much removed from truth as poetry for Plato. Levinas distrusts art and rhetoric
because they philosophise, represent, speak for, and in the process, manipulate the other. Both literature and its critical exegesis, being meaning-conferring activities, work by violence and ontology. Narrative fiction as opposed to other literary genres is falsification as it fails to grant due credit to the priority of the relation with the other. Colin Davis says: “Levinas’s hostility to art and literature undergoes shifts... but he does not... soften his position on narrative” (2004:92). Davis goes on to say that because of Levinas’s intransigence with regard to narratives, the possibility of an encounter with the other, which is central to the Levinasian oeuvre, in novels, is missed.

Significantly, many of Levinas’s own books are commentaries on the Talmud and he considers religious scriptures as pre-eminently an encounter with the other. Levinas says, “Writing is always prescription and ethics, the word of God which commands me and dedicates me to other” (Davis 2004:94). Yet, he grants the status of religious books to some “so-called national literatures, Shakespeare and Molière, Dante and Cervantes, Goethe and Pushkin.” According to Davis, Levinas also accepts that such national literatures “may also be inspired, in the sense of embodying an ethical exposure to the other which ensures that they are always available to fresh exegesis because they mean more than they say” (2004:94). Evidently, Levinas accords a privileged status to some works, which he refuses to others.

Levinas rejects narratives, because they, according to him, impose meaning and hence stand in the way of one’s exposure to the other. However, as all language use being story and rhetoric, there appears to be no viable alternative for the humans, and fighting against story is always a losing battle as Levinas’s own project indicates. Nobody else was more aware of it than Levinas himself about his own unmeditated slip into narrativization in Totality and infinity. And hence, the unavailing struggle to steer clear of emplotment and thematization in his later masterpiece Otherwise than being is evidently attempting yet again the impossible. In trying to be untrammelled from the spectre of stories, Otherwise than being, as Davis observes, is on course of “generating a discourse which is intensely focused on its own impossibility” (2004:98).
If the key takeaway in Levinas’s thought is the realization of the unconditional responsibility for the other in our lives, and if Levinas’s own works become, as Critchley puts it, “the performative enactment of ethical writing” (1992:8), all works, literary or otherwise, may unwork a petrified philosophy and become an instrument of exposure to the other. The same tenor is maintained by Eaglestone who says that Levinas’s book “echoes literary writing” and hence could form “a part of literature” and will logically lead to “opening up literature to the possibility of ethical saying” (1997:162). This for Eaglestone is equally true of criticism as well, for “critical writing, like philosophy must be a continual process of interruption” (1997:168). Again, Jill Robbins argues that Levinas’s aim is not to discredit art but to unwork ontology, and hence great art possessing the dignity of sacred texts exposes one to the other. Levinas, after all, is concerned about “art in relation to ethics, interruption than ontology” (1999:154).

6. **LIFE OF PI AS A PROXY FOR HOLY UNIVERSE**

Even as narrative literature and the nonhuman other are relegated to a secondary status in Levinas’s ethics, this study hazards, with some trepidation, Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* as a potent ethical interruption and a performative that unworks ontology. *Life of Pi* is a proxy for the paleolithic phase of the human, inevitably marked by an organic interconnectedness between the human and the nonhuman, constantly exposed to the nonhuman, both helped and humbled, assisted and agonized, sustained and threatened by the nonhuman other. The novel is also about life in a world devoid of certainties, propped up and spurned by the nonhuman, and is as well about the impossible life without the nonhuman that pilots and is piloted by the human. The novel, by primarily stressing the inability to privilege the human, yet duly recognizing human reason and aesthetics, indicates the shared fate, in life or death, of being “in the same boat” (164) of everyone. To that extent *Life of Pi* has an unusual candidness that would have delighted a D. H. Lawrence.

*Life of Pi* centres around a sixteen year old Indian boy named Pi Patel who, en route to Canada, is shipwrecked in the Pacific Ocean and is set
adrift on a lifeboat with a ferocious adult Bengal tiger called Richard Parker for 227 days, before he reaches the coast of Mexico and finally settles down in Canada. It is an indictment against an exclusionary, anthropomorphized worldview epitomized by the zoo which is a miniature of extreme human contrivance that brings together an assemblage of animals for the service, commercial and aesthetic, of humankind. There is an un-selfconscious application of the human yardstick by Pi when he says that “in a zoo, we do for animals what we have done for ourselves with houses: we bring together in a small place what in the world is spread out” (17). Pi, in all naivete, is sure that if these animals possessed intelligence such as that of the human, they would readily opt for the zoo for its security and food, much as humans do. For in such a state, he goes on to state – with blissful oblivion, and in a section tingling with irony – , “all animals are content” (19) because it is “designed and run according to the most modern, biologically sound principles” (12), whereas as a matter of fact, these animals are deracinated and denatured in a zoo.

If the above ingenuous appraisal by a champion of zoos occasions a déjá vu of colonial jargon and white man’s burden, it is equally an ironic commentary on the antihumanist creed of poststructuralism that, in spite of the tantalizing terminology, has never sought to restore the nonhuman to its rightful place. Honesty may incline one to agree with Luce Irigaray in confessing to the “difficulty of understanding animal life from within” as “I do not inhabit it from the inside, it remains foreign to me” (5). The extent of the charges of argumentum ad ignorantium in this context may require further study though.

The tall claims of the chauvinist humanism get deflated constantly in the novel, as for instance, when referring to human and animal learning, Pi says: “Repetition is important in the training not only of animals but also of humans” (23). Pi also refers to the “animal equivalent of anthropomorphism: zoomorphism, where an animal takes a human being or another animal to be one of its kind” (84), insinuating the inequity in a unilateral valuation. Pi and his brother, as they were about to leave India, felt like “two animals ... being shipped to the Canada zoo” (88). The narrative identifies man as “the most dangerous animal in a zoo” (29),
and the human becomes the scourge of the universe when it is “Animalus anthrormorphicus, the animal as seen through human eyes . . . . The obsession with putting ourselves at the centre of everything is the bane. ...” (31). Pi’s father takes due credit in the fact that domestication attempts have left the ferocious animals of the wild more tractable.

The shipwreck divests Pi of “every single thing I [Pi] value in life” (98), not to speak of the vestiges of chauvinist humanism. Pi sheds the uniquely human characteristics one by one as both he and Richard Parker are at the mercy of the elements. Realizing the limitation of overblown reason and intelligence, Pi asks a rhetorical question: “What is the purpose of reason, Richard Parker?” (98). Pi leads a precarious existence from moment to moment from the time the sailors throw him to the hyena as its feed. He deviates into life, so to speak, from that chancy dice throw, like the novel that is itself a trope for the precarious existence of everyone.

Pi acknowledges his debt to Richard Parker profusely in weathering the disaster: “Without Richard Parker, I wouldn’t be alive today to tell you my story” (164). Pi’s Plan number seven for tackling the tiger, that is, “keep him alive” (166) is the dawning of knowledge about the shared fate of being always at the mercy of the elements: “we would live – or we would die – together” (164). If Plan number seven to keep the tiger alive blunders Pi into continued existence, it is due to the realization of a shared fate which is the only option before the human and the nonhuman to hold on to, if in a rather subdued fashion. Indeed Pi, Richard Parker and the elements together have an interdependent life.

Time and history, uniquely human, are rendered irrelevant during this period of interdependence, much like in the paleolithic phase. “I survived,” says Pi, “because I forgot even the very notion of time” (192). Instead, he is left only with the memories of “events and encounters and routines” (192). By problematizing history, progress and teleology all of which together allegedly defined the human, any claim to special privilege is negated by the narrative. Clothing, the most visible part of culture, goes overboard: “For months, I lived stark naked” (192). There is hardly any claim on cognitive superiority to his companion tiger: “The stars meant nothing to me. I couldn’t name a single constellation” (193). Nationalist sentiments become meaningless as Pi drifts without a destination: “winds
and currents decided where I went” (193). Pi’s vegetarian habit proves itself to be shallow as he now “tried everything but the worms” (197). He sustains himself on turtle blood which he drinks “to the last drop” (201); he descends “to the level of savagery” (197) to which civilized life, for Pi, has now ceased to be a binary.

Hardly anything differentiates Pi from the tiger in terms of food. Eating raw fish is the order of the day, and he “no more than rinsed off their slimy slipperiness before biting into them” (212). Their mutual dependence and identification is complete as Pi notices that he “ate like an animal . . . exactly the way Richard Parker ate” (225). In dire straits, Pi eats “anything” and he “tried once to eat Richard Parker’s feces” (213) in a new phase wherein he represents himself as having “abandoned the last vestiges of humanness” (214). The narrative debunks any pretence to a unique human ‘essence’ by exposing its unsure foundations, and hence the indefensibility of any privileged status.

Pi’s paradoxical response – at once the struggle for mastery over the tiger and the elements, and his absolute dependence on them – parallels the early history of humanization, the life of ancient people, leading a life on the edges, yet cleverly manoeuvring a delicate balance with the nonhuman, by apportioning to self and others due operational spheres, which were not to be encroached. This indeed must have been the sense of holiness that governed the universe.

The novel cautions against the ontological project of all language use and rhetoric as much as the need to unwork ontology. For instance, against the conventional notion of the tiger as the man-eater, Pi says, “man-eaters among animals are as rare as murderers among men” (246), not to mention Pi’s own confession that he “ate some” (256) of the castaway’s flesh himself. Besides, even in Pi’s ‘false’ story at the end of the novel, both the cook and the narrator are cannibals. The outraged mother asks the cook, “Where is your humanity? . . . you monster” (307). Hence man-eating is held out definitely as no ground for privileging the human.

Occasionally, to say the least, human cognition is no match for nonhuman awareness. In the carnivorous island, for example, the tiger has the better
sense to return to the lifeboat in the night discerning the threat of the algae in the night, and so do the meerkats who huddle up the tree, as it were, determinedly. On the other hand, Pi’s knowledge, long in coming, is by serendipity, affirming yet again that one cannot brook the superior–inferior debate about the human and nonhuman, which may be better left unresolved.

When the oil tanker in the narrative goes past the lifeboat, Pi loses all hope. And it is the tiger who instils that precious little life-drive in him. Had it not been for the tiger, he “would die of hopelessness” (230). This hopelessness produces a craving for logos, “a book. A long book with a never-ending story” like the Bible, the Koran or the Vedas, a grand narrative, the contingency of whose origin, significantly, does not make it easily dispensable. Hence the postmodern wilderness derives succour only from, as Arran Gare puts it, “a ‘polyphonic’ grand narrative” that “would have all the virtues of a conception of history as a struggle for both human and animal emancipation – without having to make any dubious claims for cosmic purpose and a teleology preexisting history” (2000:209).

Life of Pi is a proxy for a possible holy postmodern life, deeply in fellowship with the nonhuman, much like the paleolithic phase; yet, conserving reason, aesthetics, and the gods. It upholds the sacrality of the entire universe, supplanting an already discredited transcendent religion. A comprehensive ethics that Levinas describes as a pre-originary relation that happens in an “antiority anterior to any representable anteriority” (1969:195) should include everyone, human and nonhuman. Thus, Levinas has, if rather unwittingly, provided the optimal philosophical framework for upholding the moral worth of the nonhuman. Finally, to know that each and everyone is intrinsically worthy and nonpareil, is the groundwork for embarking on the possibility of a mutually assured survival (as opposed to mutually assured destruction) and is perhaps a good enough reason for giving the nonhuman its due.
REFERENCES


Revisioning Levinas for postmodern holiness


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