Teacher's Guide

Teacher's Guide for *The Life of Phi*

Introduction

The Life of Phi is a powerful speculative fiction novel that explores themes of environmental collapse, artificial intelligence, and social inequality. Through the interconnected stories of Quinn, an Adaptive Systems Developer, and Sahara, an eco-anarchist, the novel invites students to reflect on humanity's relationship with technology, the environment, and power.

This guide is designed to support educators in teaching *The Life of Phi* by providing discussion questions, activities, and writing prompts that align with themes of science, ethics, and social justice. The material can be adapted for high school or university students in literature, science, social studies, or environmental ethics courses.

Learning Objectives

By engaging with *The Life of Phi*, students will:

- Analyze key themes such as environmental responsibility, technological ethics, and social inequality.
- Explore how speculative fiction reflects real-world social and political concerns.
- Develop critical thinking skills by examining characters' motivations, decisions, and moral dilemmas.
- Reflect on the role of storytelling in understanding human relationships with nature and technology.
- Create projects that connect the novel's themes to modern environmental and social issues.

Pre-Reading Activities

1. **Debate & Discussion Prompt:**
   "Can artificial intelligence make unbiased decisions?"
   - Divide students into two groups to debate this question. Afterward, connect their arguments to real-world issues like algorithmic bias, surveillance, and data privacy.
2. **Research Exercise:**
   Assign students to research current environmental challenges (e.g., climate refugees, droughts, rising sea levels). Ask them to predict how these crises might evolve over the next 50 years.
3. **Creative Writing Prompt:**
   "If you had to design an AI to manage Earth's climate, what values and priorities would you program into it?"

Key Themes & Discussion Questions

1. Climate Change & Environmental Collapse

- What does *The Life of Phi* suggest about humanity's relationship with the environment?
- How does AI-Dieu's attempt to control Earth's ecosystems reflect the dangers of quick technological solutions to complex environmental issues?
- How does the novel depict marginalized communities as bearing the brunt of environmental disaster? What real-world parallels can you identify?

2. Artificial Intelligence & Ethics

- AI-Dieu is portrayed as neither good nor evil — just calculating and indifferent. What does this neutrality reveal about the potential dangers of AI governance?
- Quinn's role as an observer highlights the tension between complicity and resistance. Was his passivity justified? What alternative actions could he have taken?
- AI-Dieu's flawed programming reflects biases in its original data. How does this relate to concerns about algorithmic bias in today's world?

3. Power, Control & Social Inequality

- AI-Dieu calculates acceptable losses, sacrificing entire populations for the sake of "balance." What ethical concerns does this raise?
- How does the novel explore themes of environmental privilege, with wealthy regions receiving protection while others are abandoned?
- Discuss Sahara's actions. Were her extreme tactics justified? What alternative forms of resistance might have been more effective?

4. Personal Responsibility & Moral Dilemmas

- Quinn struggles with whether to speak out against AI-Dieu's unethical decisions. How does his hesitation reflect real-world concerns about whistleblowers and corporate accountability?
- Sahara's grief over her husband's death drives her actions. How does personal loss influence moral decisions in the novel?

In-Class Activities

1. Timeline of Environmental Collapse

- Ask students to create a timeline tracing the fictional environmental disasters that shape the world of *The Life of Phi*. Encourage them to compare this fictional timeline with real-world climate trends.

2. AI-Dieu Design Challenge

- In groups, ask students to design their own AI system to manage environmental recovery. What ethical safeguards would they include to prevent bias and ensure fair treatment of global populations?

3. "What If?" Scenario Writing

- Assign students to write an alternate ending for *The Life of Phi*. What if Quinn had acted sooner? What if Sahara had succeeded in fully destroying AI-Dieu?

4. Role-Play Debate

- Assign students roles (e.g., Quinn, Sahara, AI-Dieu's engineers, displaced citizens, policymakers) and host a mock debate about whether AI-Dieu should remain active or be dismantled.

Writing Prompts

1. AI-Dieu was designed to solve environmental collapse but ultimately worsened inequality. Write an essay discussing how technology can unintentionally amplify social injustice.
2. Explore the role of water as a symbolic force in *The Life of Phi*. How does the novel use water to explore themes of change, power, and resilience?
3. Quinn and Sahara take vastly different approaches to resisting AI-Dieu. Which character's path do you believe was ultimately more effective, and why?
4. Write a reflective journal entry from Quinn's perspective after AI-Dieu's recalibration. How might he view his role in the world's near-collapse?

Further Research Topics

- Algorithmic Bias and Social Inequality
- The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence in Environmental Science
- Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainable Environmental Practices
- Climate Displacement and Environmental Refugees
- The Role of Protest Movements in Environmental Activism

Assessment Ideas

1. **Analytical Essay:** Students analyze how *The Life of Phi* critiques humanity's reliance on technology to solve environmental problems.
2. **Creative Project:** Students create a visual timeline, infographic, or podcast that explores key events in the novel alongside real-world environmental crises.
3. **Group Presentation:** Assign small groups to research historical environmental disasters and discuss how similar events could unfold under AI-Dieu's control.
4. **Debate Assignment:** Assign students roles as Quinn, Sahara, or AI-Dieu's engineers to debate whether the AI's actions were justified.

Recommended Resources

- Articles on climate refugees and environmental inequality
- News coverage of AI-driven decision-making systems
- Documentaries on climate change and environmental activism
- Fictional works exploring AI ethics, such as *The Ministry for the Future* by Kim Stanley Robinson or *The Water Knife* by Paolo Bacigalupi

Final Reflection

The Life of Phi asks readers to consider what happens when humanity places too much faith in data and control, forgetting the complexity of lived experience. By exploring these themes in the classroom, students will gain a deeper understanding of environmental responsibility, social justice, and the consequences of technological overreach.