



VOICING MULTICULTURALISM: RUMINATIONS ON YANN MARTEL'S *Life of Pi*

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ABSTRACT

Multiculturalism encapsulates harmonious co-existence of multiple cultures within a common boundary. The basic philosophy of multiculturalism is that all cultures are interconnected. Differences are to be recognized, acknowledged and celebrated because in spite of cultural disparities, mankind is intrinsically alike. The paper deliberates on this cosmic interconnectedness by analyzing the multiple cultural voices in Yann Martel's adventure novel *Life of Pi*. The paper proposes to examine the aspect through four standpoints: the loci (Canada, Mexico, India), the animal companions (as cultural symbols), the religions and the author/narrator overlap. The novel envisions the multicultural principle of living and working together harmoniously for the benefit of mankind. The lead character Pi is an Indian settled in Canada, who had survived a shipwreck. The novel narrates his experiences on a solitary lifeboat in the company of four animals. Pi's Indian upbringing, blended with his acceptance and understanding of the basic tenets of the different religions he encounters, helps him survive through the hazardous journey. Tolerance, understanding, care, strength and friendship between distinct cultures is also being given expression through the novel. Gandhi, Tagore and Aurobindo have always emphasized religious, linguistic and cultural harmony through their teachings. The paper attempts to bring out the multiple cultural significations in the text that also hint that India can be instrumental for promoting multiculturalism.

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"The united progress of mankind would thus be realized by a general principle of interchange and assimilation between individual and individual and again between individual and community, between community and community and again between the smaller commonalty and the totality of mankind...".

Sri Aurobindo Ghose's above mentioned quote is from his essay on "The Ideal of Human Unity" (422). The

statement points towards the essential principle of multiculturalism which encapsulates the harmonious co-existence of multiple cultures within a common boundary. The basic philosophy underlying the concept of multiculturalism is that all cultures are to be acknowledged along with the realization that differences are to be recognized and celebrated, because, in spite of cultural disparities, mankind is intrinsically alike. The paper deliberates on this cosmic interconnectedness by analyzing the multiple cultural

voices in Yann Martel's adventure novel *Life of Pi*. The novel envisions the multicultural principle of living and working together with general accord and peace.

The paper proposes to examine the aspects through four standpoints: the loci (Canada, Mexico, India); the animal companions (as cultural symbols); the religions (cultural products) and the author/narrator overlap (signifying cultural homogeneity). The lead character Pi, is an Indian settled in Canada. The novel narrates his experiences on a solitary lifeboat in the company of four animals – a hyena, a zebra, an orangutan and a Bengal tiger. Pi masters the lessons of survival, tolerance, companionship and mutual brotherhood and understanding during his hazardous journey. The paper attempts to bring out the multiple cultural significations in the text along with hinting that India can serve as a platform for promoting multiculturalism

The Loci

Canada, Mexico and Pondicherry (India) are the three places that figure in the novel. These places are regarded to be hubs of multiculturalism. India is the common factor for the other two places. Canada houses a large population of Indians, especially Sikhs who are successful businessmen. Indo Canadians enjoy dual citizenship. Pi, an Indian has settled in Canada and he has married an Indian born in Canada (Martel 80). His children-Nikhil and Usha, bear typical Indian names (92) Pi is thus the example for adaptability that is nascent in the cultures that mingle together. He keeps up his cultural background along with imbibing the new land's culture. Pi prepares western dishes like macaroni and tacos (25) as well as South Indian vegetarian feasts (42) for the author. He misses "the heat of India, the food..." but he loves Canada which for him is "a great country" made up of "compassionate, intelligent people". (6)

Pi is born in Pondicherry, India. Pondicherry is a locale wherein we notice the co-existence of French, Indian (Tamil) and British cultures. Mexico is a land of mixed cultures. Studies have revealed that Mexicans bear close resemblance to South Indians. The cuisine of both places are spicy and diverse. Mexico and India belong to two separate continents but they share

uniform cultural features like festivals, food and history. The multicultural message of brotherhood and love for humanity is disclosed through the care shown to Pi by the native Mexicans when he lands on the Mexican shore after his hazardous sojourn. He was "overwhelmed by the generosity of those who rescued [him]." (286) Pi survival through and after the shipwreck is only because of his multicultural upbringing.

Mexico, India and Canada are bound together by the Pacific Ocean. The ocean serves as the cultural bond between the nations. Cultures learn from each other only when they come together. Pi understands the diverse nature of his co-inhabitants only when he happens to be on board with them. Oceans are the meeting places of seas hence the Pacific Ocean in the novel symbolizes this interconnectedness with all forms of life on the earth. Being all alone on the ocean with the animals helps him learn and study them closely. Multiculturalism speaks about the unity of cultures across the world. Multicultural dialogues are to be promoted for a better understanding of the world. India can be the meeting place for such exchanges. Jawaharlal Nehru affirmed this by stating that India is marching towards "the one world of tomorrow where national cultures will be intermingled with the international culture of the human race." (281)

The Animals

Animals are closely related to humans. They figure in the cultural practices of the region where they are found in abundance. Human characteristics are attributed to animals. Each culture will have an animal symbolizing their inherent beliefs and rituals. Each animal that figures in the novel can be associated with the region they are found. A close examination will highlight the uniqueness of the animal thereby hinting at the specificity of each nation it symbolizes. The zebra is the first animal to join Pi on board. The animal lands on the life boat with a broken rear leg. The zebra in the novel is a male Grants Zebra, a native of Africa and Asia. In Native American culture, it is regarded to be the symbol of balance, beauty, grandeur, uniqueness and harmony. The zebra "bore

suffering patiently without showing remonstrations.”(Martel 120)This is indicative of how sectarian groups ,when overpowered by dominant groups, remain helpless and desolate. Africa and Asia have been home to rich civilizations like the Egyptian and Indus Valley. Cultural diversity is present in these two continents. The lands which were once dominant cultural loci have now lost their initial grandeur but the archaeological discoveries speak volumes of their majestic past.

The spotted hyena is the first occupant of the boat .The animal belongs to the exquisite breed of hyenas prevalent in parts of Africa, America and India .This animal is generally associated with evil significations in many cultures. The hyena’s presence in the novel is necessary to highlight how cultural dominance and cultural clashes are a major threat in the post multicultural era .The minority groups remain subdued and subservient. Multicultural platforms must deliberate upon these issues thereby proposing feasible solutions. The hyena attacks the zebra and the orangutan (named Orange Juice). The resistance put forward by the orangutan reminds us of the current world scenario wherein cultural groups put up brave struggles to survive overpowering groups (129). This ape is regarded to be the closest relative of man kind. . They are native to Malaysia and Indonesia but the animal is now found only on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra. The death of the orangutan indicates the extinction of distinct world cultures. Multiculturalists have to identify the cultures that are on the verge of extinction as a result of globalization. The orangutan is also symbolic of mother-child bonding. For Pi the orangutan stood for his mother .He is reminded of “her never-ending arms” (130) surrounding him when he was a child. Tears well up in his eyes when he witnesses the slaughter of Orange Juice. The ‘mother’ as the image of fertility, love and provider of comfort and care is evident in almost all the cultures around the world. Pi affirms this when he refers to Orange Juice as the “blessed Great Mother Pondicherry fertility goddess, provider of milk and love, wondrous arm spread of comfort...”(111)

The Bengal Tiger is the sole companion of Pi throughout the ordeal. The tiger seems to be the only animal with a human name. The presence of the tiger on the lifeboat makes Pi safe from the hyena’s attack. He owes his life to the tiger who is named Richard Parker. The human-tiger bond has been revered in almost all cultures. In Chinese culture, the tiger symbolizes immense strength, vitality and agility. The Bengal tiger is the national animal of the Indian subcontinent. The tiger provides Pi with the positive energy to move on even in the midst of deplorable conditions .The tiger retreats into the forest after he lands on the Mexican shore. Pi and the tiger stay together for 227 days. Their co-habitation on the lifeboat is symbolic of the harmonious co-existence of apparently different cultures within a common boundary.

Other than the four animal companions on the lifeboat, Pi comes into contact with other land and water species. Multiculturalism encourages crossing of geographical boundaries to enhance understanding of other cultures. The variety of sea life helps Pi marvel at the wonders of creation. The fish and turtles- culturally significant species - provide him not just with the necessary nourishment on board but also with ample relief from the morbid life all alone on sea. Pi befriends sharks, kills flying fish and turtles, identifies a variety of birds while he was on the boat (all indicative of multiculturalism). Pi is basically a vegetarian but he feeds on non vegetarian diet when the situation demanded. Multiculturalism promotes the diverse food habits around the world. The meerkats he meets on the desolate island are examples of “meekness” personified. The animals are unaffected by the arrival of the outsiders (Pi and Richard Parker). “They went about their business as if the elements did not exist.”(271) They are generous enough to share their plenty with the outsiders (267). Tolerance and acceptance is mastered by Pi when he lives through a major storm on the island.

Religion

Pi’s Indian upbringing, blended with his acceptance and understanding of the basic tenets of the different religions he encounters during his

teenage, helps him survive the perilous journey. Pi remarks that "paths to liberation are numerous ,but the bank along the way is always the same..."(49) Religion brings him close to the Infinite (62). His hours on the boat were punctuated with regular prayer intervals (190). This provides him with the determination and positive energy to move on Pi realizes the message of love and brotherhood inherent in each religion he imbibed (71). His house in Canada is replete with iconic symbols of the religions he practices (45-46) Multiculturalism promotes the unification of world religions for the benefit of humanity. India is a country where "there is freedom of practice"(68), hence ,she can be the platform for world peace through inter religious tolerance.

Author/Narrator Overtones

Pi, the narrator might be a fictional contrivance but he seems to merge with the author so much so that one might feel that it's actually the life of Martel and not that of Pi. Multiculturalism aims at identifying the cultural similarities between nations. Blending leads to homogenization and evolution of hybrid cultures. Like Pi, Martel has been to Mexico, India and Canada. He is a Spanish Canadian writer whose first language is French but he writes in English. Pi is a native of Tamil Nadu, but he speaks English and is settled in Canada. Their secular upbringing helps them accept the plurality of nations. Pi has a French foster mother while he is in Canada. Martel is provided with the story line by an Indian Francis Adirubasamy (xii) Pi loves Canada but he has memories of Pondicherry (6). Martel loves India and while he is away from his place, he has memories of Canada(xi) just as Pi. Both have their education at the University of Toronto. Cross cultural exchanges and multicultural transfer/mingling is being alluded to here.

To conclude, the novel has thus artistically presented multicultural ideals. Martel once remarked in an interview that he was dazzled by the diversity and unity prevalent in India. This might probably be why he chose India as the starting point of his story. India can be instrumental in carving a multicultural world .This is an era of mutual understanding and

assimilation.Let us realize, as Sudhir Kakar writes in his book *Indian Identity* that :

We are moving toward a multiculturalism, with majority and minority cultures, rather than the emergence of a 'composite culture.' Such a multiculturalism is neither harmful nor dangerous but necessary, since it enables different religious groups to deal with the modernizing process in an active way rather than making them withdraw in lamentation at the inequities of modernization or endure it as passive victims.(368)

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