



## LIFE OF PI: A SPECTACULAR COMBINATION OF ZOOLOGICAL ODDITY, RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND EXPERIMENTALISM

Dr. KRISHNA DAIYA

Asst. Professor in English (Class II), Government Engineering College, Rajkot



**Dr. KRISHNA DAIYA**

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### ABSTRACT

I would guess that most books come from the same mix of three elements: influence, inspiration and hard work... Each one came into play in the writing of *Life of Pi*.

-Yann Martel

(In "How I Wrote Life of Pi" - *Original Essays*)

*Life of Pi* is the Man Booker Prize-winning novel by the Canadian author Yann Martel. It narrates the incredible survival story of a teen named Pi who is stranded on a life boat for what seems like forever, with a tiger for company at sea in the Pacific Ocean.

The novel is set against the tumultuous period of Indian History, the Emergency. In 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was found guilty of charges related to her 1971 Election Campaign. She was ordered to resign. However, instead of resigning, Gandhi declared a state of Emergency. This meant suspension of the Constitutional rights and the complete power to rule by decree. This political turmoil lasted for eighteen months. In the novel, Pi's father, a zoo-keeper in Pondicherry, India, grows nervous of the political scenario. Speculating that Gandhi may even take over his zoo, he decides to sell off his zoo animals and move his family to Canada.

The novel is a magical reading experience set in an endless blue expanse. After a harrowing shipwreck, Pi finds himself adrift in the Pacific Ocean, trapped on a lifeboat with a wounded zebra, a spotted hyena, a seasick orangutan, and a 450 – pound Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. After much of gore and infighting, Pi and Richard Parker remain the boat's sole passengers, drifting for 227 days.

### SPECTACULAR ASPECT OF THE NOVEL

The shark-infested waters provide the novel with some spectacular scenes which make it a dazzling work of imagination that delight as well as astound the mind. The massive storm striking the ship with all its might create awe at forces of Nature. The rains lashing the ship, rocking it to and fro terrifying man and beast alike makes hair stand on its end. The gorgeous imagery of the sea transports the reader to a world of beauty, where the sky looks as sublime as the sea and the stars shine as brightly as the ripple of a stone thrown in the water. The description of the mysterious island creates stunning

visuals before the mind's eye. It is a strange island of trees that grows directly out of vegetation, without any soil. It is all radiant and sparkling at the night with the algae emitting light. There is a huge colony of meerkats who sleep in tree of freshwater ponds. Pi and Richard Parker stay here for a time only to discover that the island is carnivorous and hence they finally head back out to sea.

### Zoological Oddities

The reader stumbles upon the zoological oddities throughout the novel. Pi's sunny childhood in the Pondicherry zoo speaks volumes about animal behaviour. Zoos are places of habit. Animals prefer

the consistency of life in a zoo just as humans accustom themselves to the rituals and abundance of modern society. Zoo animals barely run away, even if given the opportunity as they enjoy abundant food and water. By contrast, life in the wild is a fierce battle for survival. It is a race against the odds and other creatures. Death makes its presence felt.

Animals in the wild lead lives of compulsion and necessity within an unforgiving social hierarchy in an environment where the supply of fear is high and the supply of food is low and where territory must constantly be defended and parasites forever endured. (Chapter 4, p.17)

In the book, Pi describes in vivid detail the day his father fed a live goat to a caged tiger to teach Pi and his brother, Ravi, about the danger posed by wild animals. But according to a sign in the zoo, the most dangerous of all animals is man. Pi also explains flight distance – the minimum distance at which an animal will tolerate a potential predator or an enemy. The key to run a smooth zoo is to get animals accustomed to human presence and provide them sufficient food and water. Animals are fiercely defensive of their own area as well as respect the territory of other creatures and this is why lion tamers enter the cage first, establishing their dominance before the lions are brought in.

#### Religious Tolerance

From the animalistic rites and rituals, the novel has transitioned into a section about religious rites and rituals. The author illustrates the pious routine in the church going Christian, the chanting of hymns and Muslim Prayer. There are the objects that lend comfort to the soul: paintings of religious figures and devotional articles. There is the description of the Patel house in Canada, which is full of religious iconography. It has Hindu, Christian and Islamic paintings, statues, devotional articles, photographs, clothes and books. Pi keeps the Bible on his nightstand.

Religious tolerance leads Pi forward on the path to spirituality; Pi was not just a Hindu, Christian or Muslim, but all the three simultaneously. Pi's parents were also surprised to learn Pi's secret. He responded that he just wanted to love God. He also speculates that people who act out in violence or

anger in the name of God misunderstand the true nature of religion. Master Plots suggested the "central themes of *Life of Pi* concern religion and human faith in God." (Paul Cockeram 2010)

The additive quality of heaping layers on layers, spices on spices also helps explain why Pi practices multiple religions simultaneously. Normal born-and-raised Hindu does not adopt two additional faiths. However, Pi sets out to discover more stories, more versions of reality, and more options. Each faith has its own unique myths and fables, rituals and customs, own understanding of God. Pi understands the very essence of all religions i.e. Love. By practicing multiple religions, he has surrounded himself with various layers of affection. Phoebe Kate Foster comments:

He acquires layer after layer of diverse spirituality and brilliantly synthesizes it into a personal belief system and devotional life that is breathtaking in its depth and scope. His youthful exploration into comparative religion culminates in a magnificent epiphany of sorts. (Phoebe Kate Foster 2002)

The surprising streak is that for such a religious boy, Pi admires atheists. He feels that it is very important to believe in something. He can appreciate an atheist's ability to believe in the absence of God. He, however, has only disdain for agnostics who can select neither way and have no definite stand about the existence of God. They cannot take a leap of faith in either direction.

To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation. (Chapter 7, p. 31)

#### Experimentalism

As the story advances, we realize that it is not merely a novel, nor so much an allegory. It also isn't just a magical realist fable. It is truly an edge-of-seat adventure. Here come the writer's experimental techniques that turn the story into a visually enchanting adventure with a climax that meddles with our perception.

The climax is indeed intriguing. When the two officials from the maritime department in the Japanese ministry of transport insist that Pi should tell them the "truth" about the sinking of the Japanese ship 'Tsimtsum', Pi reveals another version. Here, the animals are replaced by humans. The beautiful, noble zebra is the exotic Chinese sailor.

The violent, uglyhyena stands for the greedy cook. The maternal orangutan represents Pi's own mother. And the tiger is Pi himself, who is passive as well as fierce, tamed and at the same time ravenous and self-contained.

The latter version leads us to assume that Pi has probably made up the animal version to cope with a series of shocking events. It is his story telling power that has preserved his sanity from the absolute depths of despair. At the broadest level, the deception also helps us to understand that it is the ability of humans to establish the truth, or even alter it, in order to deal with something heart-wrecking. As Peter Yan points out:

*Life of Pi* is told from two alternating points of view, the main character Pi in a flashback and Yann Martel himself, who is the "visiting writer"... This technique of the intrusive narrator adds the documentary realism to the book, setting up, like a musical counter-point, the myth-making, unreliable narrator, Pi. (Online)

The author's experimentation is visible not only in this amazing twist that is highly metaphorical, but also his display of language and symbols. There are multiple points of view involved in narration. The prefatory Author's Note is written in the first person by the author, who explains how he came across the story that we then read from Pi Patel himself. The account, which comprises of Part One and Part Two, is told in first person by Pi. The final section of the book (Part Three) is written mainly as a transcript of a conversation between Pi and two officials. The book then ends by first person comments from the author.

The author's narration of the smallest details, the blurred mind of Pi, the spectacular scenes that come alive before our mind's eye, the account of the nature and habits of animals, the mesmerizing description of the journey of sea (which is an inevitable reminder of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*), and the ability to use words to point out the abstract things in an incredibly concrete way, carry away the reader in the smooth flow of events.

The tone of the novel is at times funny, at other times surreal. Sometimes it is also ruminative and philosophical. And sometimes, the tone becomes journalistic, with the objectivity of the third person. The Setting is primarily at Pi's boyhood home in

Pondicherry, India. The story then takes full shape in the Pacific Ocean. The Setting later is Mexico and finally moves to Toronto, Canada.

The sinking of the ship forms the major conflict of the novel. Here, Pi loses his entire family, the crew, and most of the animals aboard. When the ship sinks, the first climax of the novel is reached and another climax occurs when Pi lands in Mexico. However, the anti-climax is Pi's parallel story in which the animals are replaced by human beings. A little bit of suspense comes into play when the author and Pi himself continually make reference to some tragic episode in Pi's life without actually naming it. Territorial dominance, Hunger and Thirst, and Rituals form the Motifs in the novel.

The use of symbolism makes the novel reach the height of subtlety. It begins at the very beginning with the name of the protagonist himself. Piscine Molitor Patel's preferred name 'Pi' is not just a shortened version of his original name. It is a letter in the Greek alphabet containing 'alpha' and 'omega' that denote the dominant and submissive creatures. Pi is also an irrational mathematical number, used to calculate distance in a circle. Often shortened to 3.14, Pi has so many decimal places that it is beyond the human mind's comprehension. The color 'orange' is an unmistakable representation of the will to live. Before the sinking of the ship, the adult Pi has been described at his home in Canada. His daughter, Usha, carries an orange cat. This assures the reader that the story is not going to be a complete tragedy. The little orange cat reminds us of the big orange cat, Richard Parker who helps Pi survive during his 227 days at sea:

It was Richard Parker who calmed me down. It is the irony of this story that the one who scared me witless to start with was the very same who brought me peace, purpose, I dare say even wholeness. (Chapter 57, p. 179)

As the ship sinks, Pi is given a life-jacket with an orange whistle. On the boat, he finds an orange lifebuoy. Orange juice, the orangutan provides emotional Support. The strong desire to cling to life is visible in Pi's thoughts constantly:

The reason death sticks so closely to life isn't biological necessity-it's envy. Life is so beautiful that death has fallen in love with it, a jealous, possessive love that grabs at what it

can. But life leaps over oblivion lightly, losing only a thing or two of no importance, and gloom is but the passing shadow of a cloud.

(Chapter 1, p. 6)

The zoo animals also are a representation of life in modern, urban city. People slip into a comfortable, easygoing life and do not have to struggle to obtain sustenance. But out in the wild the zoo animals have to constantly struggle to get food and water. This is exactly why people are reluctant to leave their comfort zone and step into the unknown.

The animals in the lifeboat embody qualities that represent their human counterparts. Orange Juice, the orangutan, is a motherly figure. She represents Pi's own mother. Pi remembers how this gentle orangutan used to hold him when he was a boy, picking at his hair. And when she puts up a fight against hyena for self-defense, Pi realizes her courage and fierceness too. The hyena, with its ugly appearance and disgusting habits, represents the Cook. The Cook's savagery, greed and cannibalism make him the most evil figure in the novel. The zebra is an exotic creature that represents the young Chinese Sailor.

Martel's text also deals with a sharp contrast that is unmistakably and remarkably noticed. The boundless nature of sea is sharply contrasted with the strictness of boundaries and borders. These boundaries are preferred by animals who are very fond of territorial dominance as well as by humans who are constantly living within the boundaries of religion rituals and habits.

The contrasts are also brought into balance by coexisting Faith and Science, two marveling perspectives in life and world. The incredible blending of realism and imagination hints at the author's deftness in handling the narrative.

#### Comparison with Other Works

I was sort of looking for a story, not only with a small 's' but sort of with a capital 'S'- something that would direct my life. -Martel

The novel became that direction and purpose for his life. Martel has also stated that his inspiration came from reading a book review of Brazilian author Moacyr Schiar's 1981 novella *Max and the Cats*. Again, Martel named the tiger after a character from Edgar Allen Poe's nautical adventure novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*.

*Life of Pi* unmistakably reminds us of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The storm, the shipwreck and the struggle for survival are the common aspects in both these works. The relationship between the boy and the tiger also bring to our memory Kipling's *The Jungle Book* where humans and animals are brought into co-existence.

#### Comparison with the Movie

A 2012 adaptation directed by Ang Lee and based on an adapted screenplay by David Magee was given a wide release on November 21, 2012. The movie, also bearing the title *Life of Pi*, is a visual spectacle. In breathtaking 3D and featuring stunning visuals, director Ang Lee brings the story to life on the big screen. Although Lee does his best to stay true to the story, there are clear differences between the film and the novel.

In both the novel and the film, Pi is devastated when he learns that his family is leaving their hometown of Pondicherry, India, and heading to Winnipeg, Australia. However, the film adds a character to give Pi a love interest, which doesn't appear in the book. Again, the violence of the carnivores in the lifeboat and Pi's hunting are vividly described in the book whereas the film spares viewers all the blood and guts.

Pi's relationship with Richard Parker varies greatly between the novel and the film. In the movie, Richard Parker is extremely aggressive and while Pi manages to survive with him for 227 days, he never manages to tame the tiger. Pi attempts to train the tiger but when Richard Parker shows signs of aggression, he gives up on the training. The book, on the other hand, shows that Pi is very knowledgeable about animals and very cautious around Richard Parker. But he quickly asserts himself as the alpha male and trains the tiger wonderfully.

Towards the end of the book, Pi loses his vision when he runs out of food and fresh water. And he starts a conversation with a voice he believes belongs to Richard Parker. It is clear that Pi is losing his mind. He then also has an encounter with another man who is stranded at sea. The man attacks Pi but is killed by Richard Parker. The sequence doesn't appear in the film but it is a pivotal chapter in the book as it appears improbable and is the first time the reader sees Pi as an unreliable narrator.

**CONCLUSION**

Brian Bethune of Maclean's describes the novel as:

"(a) head-scratching combination of dense religious allegory, zoological lore, and enthralling adventure tale, written with warmth and grace." (Brian Bethune 2010)

*Life of Pi* keeps on unveiling new and unexpected layers that keep the reader involved, intrigued, interested and astounded. From a rousing adventure to a meta-tale of survival, it explores the redemptive and transformative function of literature. It delights and transports. It's also a story, as one character puts it, that marks you believe in God. In a letter directly to Martel, Barack Obama described *Life of Pi* as: An elegant proof of God, and the power of story-telling. (Barack Obama 2011)

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