

TREATMENT OF FAITH AND SURVIVAL IN YANN MARTEL'S *LIFE OF PI*

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ABSTRACT

Yann Martel, through his novel, Life of Pi chooses to tell the story of a survivor young boy floating on a lifeboat with a Royal Bengal tiger and with some other animals in the Pacific Ocean. He not only fights with animals on the board for his survival, but he has to confront fear, loneliness, boredom and hunger which might prove even more threatening. His struggle attains greater heights when he develops a bond with the tiger and with the passage of time both of them renounce their hostility in their larger interests. Tiger was dependent on Pi for food whereas he saved Pi not only by killing the Frenchman, but more than that, he gives Pi a company so that he can overcome his boredom and his sense of desolation. Pi's non-religious kind of faith proves to be of much support and guidance for him in the midst of crisis and his struggle for life. It all the more rescues Pi when he finds himself in extreme agony and anguish. This short research paper proposes to study how Pi's journey across the ocean makes a powerful story of faith and survival when he is left alone on the board with only a tiger for his company. It will also take in to consideration how Pi confronts on the psychological level in order to overthrow his loneliness and restiveness which could have made his struggle even more challenging and strenuous.

Key Words: *Survival, Faith, Restiveness, Ordeal, Secular belief.*

Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* which won the Man Booker prize in 2002 is the Canadian author's third book and second novel. The novel is essentially about faith and survival of an Indian teenage boy, Piscine Molitor Patel or Pi as he likes to be called, who faces immeasurable hardships when he is stranded in the middle of the Pacific Ocean on a lifeboat along with a carnivorous hyena, an orangutan, a wounded zebra, a few rats and cockroaches and a four hundred fifty pound Royal Bengal tiger called Richard Parker. The Japanese freighter, *Tsimtsum*, by which Pi and his family is immigrating to Canada along with a number of animals to be sold to zoos overseas sinks with a "monstrous metallic burp"¹ and Pi finds that he is the only survivor. His two hundred twenty seven days journey across the Pacific Ocean make a powerful story of faith and survival when he is left alone with only a tiger for company as the other animals perish one by one. Besides Pi's struggle to keep body and soul together with the meagre supplies in the lifeboat and whatever he can procure from the ocean, his chief preoccupation is to save himself from becoming the tiger's next meal. It is

his past experience with animals in his father's zoo; his intelligence and his non-religious kind of faith enable him to survive the ordeal.

Martel in an interview has said that, "everyone's the same but they express their sameness in different ways".² It, in fact, applies to the treatment of the issues of survival and faith in the novel which is alike yet different from other similar novels, e.g. Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*. Pi's predicament on the lifeboat along with so many zoo animals puts him in the position of a zoo owner with the lifeboat resembling a mini zoo. But the threat that he faces from these animals especially from the tiger and the disaster of the sea combined to make Pi's story a story with a double edge. The tiger which symbolises definite death for Pi gradually becomes a key to his survival in the sea of isolation and it becomes imperative for Pi to save the tiger as well as himself. He says, "A part of me did not want Richard Parker to die at all, because if he died I would be alone with despair, a foe even more formidable than a tiger. If I still had the will to live, it was thanks to Richard Parker. He kept me away from thinking too much about my family and my tragic circumstances".³

The whole novel is replete with disquisitions on faith especially the first part which begins with the reflections of the adult Pi whom the writer manages to trace in Canada. He is married and has two children, but the aftermath of 'suffering' is evident in his strange choice of subjects for his Bachelor's degree and some "strange religious practises"⁴ which are now a part of his life. Pi chooses religious studies and zoology as his subjects which represent two diametrically opposite perspectives of the world, one relating to faith and the other to science, and a fine and delicate balance of which exists throughout the novel. Pi also speaks of his comfortable childhood in the lush environs of his father's zoo in Pondicherry and the embarrassment he has to face on account of his French name Piscine Molitor. He has been named after a famous swimming pool in France by a fond family friend but the name is deliberately mispronounced as 'Pissing' by his classmates. He, therefore, on his own initiative changes his name to Pi which is more neutral sounding and easy on the tongue. Pi also talks of his attraction to religion or religions much to the embarrassment of his secular minded parents. Apart from his native Hindu faith, Pi follows religious practices of Islam and Christianity also. This leads to a hilarious situation when the three religious heads confront Pi and his family and come to know about his faux pas. But Pi in his embarrassment blurts out that he "just wants to love God"⁵ and that all religions are same. It, however, invites sceptical remark by his father that Pi seemed "to be attracting religions the way a dog attracts fleas".⁶ But Pi's attraction to religion is an essential prelude to his spiritual journey. It helps him to evolve a unique non-religious kind of faith which helps him to tide over difficulties in his latter life. It also makes him a true seeker of God. He realizes quite early in his life that the "main battlefield for good is not the open ground of public arena but the small clearing of each heart".⁶ To Pi, religion is about dignity, it is not about depravity and this is how he manages to symbolise the various elements of all religions in to personal belief system and devotional life which is beautiful as well as breath-taking. His seven months ordeal on the boat is the

driving force behind his spirituality and secular belief. We get a clue of the culmination of Pi's faith in the following paragraph.

“One such time I left town and on my way back, at a point where the land was high and I could see the sea to my left and down the road..... I suddenly felt I was in heaven. The spot was in fact no different from when I had passed it....., but my way of seeing it had changed. The feeling, a paradoxical mix of the pulsing energy and profound peace, was intense and beautiful. Whereas before the road, the sea, the trees, the air, the sun all spoke differently to me, now they spoke one language of unity..... Every element lived in a harmonious relation with its neighbour, all was kith and kin. I knelt as a mortal; I rose as an immortal. I felt like the centre of small circle coinciding with the centre of a much larger one. Atmah met Allah”.⁷

Pi does not forget God when he makes an inventory of the things that he has on the boat to tide him through his desperate days, and nor does he forget to include prayers in his daily routine on the life-boat. Pi's survival story is marred by the loss of his family, but his presence of mind and his substantial knowledge of animal psychology serve him well. Pi witnesses on the lifeboat which he would never see in his normal times. He sees the wounded zebra being eaten alive by the hyena. The orangutan called Orange Juice, who comes to the lifeboat “floating on an island of bananas in a halo of light”⁸ and who is the source of some cheer to Pi because of her peculiar human behaviour, is also killed by the hyena. The hyena which in Pi's own words is ‘ugly beyond redemption’ is finally killed by Richard Parker and Pi is now more than sure that he is going to be the next target. He very soon realises that in order to survive he must tame the tiger and provide regular supplies of food for the ever hungry predator. He overcomes his initial panic and with the help of a whistle, which he uses as a whip, sets out to intimidate Richard Parker. Besides marking territories, Pi also builds a raft which separates him from the lifeboat and the tiger by forty feet. But life on the raft is risky and Pi tries and succeeds in gaining a foothold on the lifeboat. Pi on one occasion also handles tiger's excreta just to demoralise the latter and gain an upper hand in their peculiar predator-prey relationship. But as Pi says, he survived because Richard Parker “did not really want to attack”⁹ him. The tiger realised that Pi was a source of food for him and so the weird symbiosis between the two lasts till their final rescue.

Pi, who had been a strict vegetarian sometimes back, learns to devour anything which is even remotely edible, from fish heads and guts to turtle flippers: “No cardamom payasam was as sweet or as rich as creamy turtle eggs or turtle fat. A chopped-up mixture of heart, lungs, liver flesh, cleaned out intestines, sprinkled fish parts, the whole soaked in yolk-and-serum gravy made an unsurpassable finger licking thali”.¹⁰ Pi even tries to eat the tigers feces but finds that it is “truly waste matter with no nutrients in it”.¹¹ Plagued by constant hunger and bruises and sores all over his body, Pi finds that worse than constant fear and hunger is boredom and wishes he had a book with a never ending story. Once, he closely misses rescue when he fails to draw the attention of a passing ship. His despair is profound and it is at this moment that Pi acknowledges his love for Richard Parker and says if he did

not have Richard Parker, he would die of hopelessness. Pi's encounter with another survivor, a Frenchman, occurs when he is almost dying of hunger and virtually blind due to an eye infection. Lost in food fantasies, Pi feels it is Richard Parker talking to him when he hears another human voice. The conversation between the two adrift and unmoored humans is an example of insanity brought about by hopelessness and hunger. Pi, with his typical oriental effusiveness, welcomes the other as his brother, but the Frenchman has other intentions. He tries to kill Pi for his flesh, but before Pi can warn him about the tiger on board, he is killed by Richard Parker. Thus, it is the tiger that saves Pi from his own kind.

There are numerous incidents in the novel that add a bit of spice to the survival saga of Pi, e.g., the first killing of the dorado, the experience with the school of flying fish, the joy of gathering the booty of freshwater from the solar stills and many such more. But the strangest of all is Pi's discovery of the floating carnivorous island made up entirely of algae and inhabited by numerous meerkats. Though Pi has touched solid ground after a long time and the algae and the meerkats provide a bountiful supply of food to both him and Richard Parker, he decides to leave the island as soon as he discovers the truth about it being a murderous island. Island that had seemed like a utopia to Pi transforms into a dystopia for him as soon as he discovers an exact set of thirty two human teeth encased in the leafy fruit of a tree. But to leave the tiger behind is unthinkable to him. He moves on and they wander aimlessly till they reach Mexico. The parting between the tiger and Pi is the most unceremonious part of the book and it haunts him for a long time. As soon as their boat touches land, Richard Parker leaps ashore and heads for the surrounding jungle without even a parting look or a growl at Pi who had been his sole companion for nearly seven months. Pi is sad and gloomy. He thinks that he is all alone. 'I was truly alone, orphaned not of my family, but now of Richard Parker and nearly, I thought, of God'.¹² What, after all, it shows that for Pi even object of death, the tiger, was his companion in his torment and he weeps like a child for his sudden disappearance. Pi is also distressed to think that he is orphaned of God. God remained with him all these months and now that ordeal is over, he thinks, his pious proximity with divinity would be over. The moments of epiphany would vanish and though he would have a sea of humanity around him, he would remain all alone in a crowd. The allegorical representation of the whole story told to the investigating officers makes the reading of the novel quite interesting. However, it comes nowhere near the real story as for as excellence is concerned. Martel has been accused of plagiarism as the plot of the story is akin to *Max and the Cat*, a novel by Brazilian author Moacyr Sclair. But Martel in his author's note has acknowledged his gratitude to Sclair for the 'spark of life in the novel'. The reader knows from the very beginning that Pi has been saved, yet the novel turns out to be a nail biting adventure story, and this is what accounts for its appeal and charm. The wonderful and elegant writing of Martel, his appeal to charm and shock at the same time, and his vivid representations of the sea add more to its beauty and makes it even more endearing. *Life of Pi* convinces us that life is full of mystery, and existence is more important than anything else.

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