

## “The Other” In the Life of Pi

**Sugandha S Singh**

Asstt. Professor, Deptt. of English  
S.M.P. Govt. Girls' P.G. College,  
Meerut

*Yann Martel was awarded the 2002 Booker Prize for his novel “Life of Pi”. It was his third book, the earlier ones being “The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios” (1993) and “Self” (1996). Yann Martel was born in Canada in 1963 but since his father was a diplomat he grew up in different parts of the world. He continued travelling as an adult and took up many odd jobs before devoting himself completely to writing. The tour de force of Yann Martel’s writings is not the ego or self but the exploration of the other – the other in the form of different cultural or religious entities and also the greatest other the nature and its inhabitants. Yann Martel in an interview had asserted, “I strongly believe in empathetic imagination, in making the effort to understand the other. Because in understanding the other, you eventually understand the other.” Pi, the protagonist of this novel, is endowed with such empathetic imagination and inspires us to believe through his unbelievable story.*

Pi Patel : “ *Tigers exist, lifeboats exist, oceans exist. Because the three never come together in your narrow limited experience, you refuse to believe that they might. Yet the plain fact is that the tsimtsam brought them together and then sank.*” (Pg 295)

This “hard to believe” story begins in Part II of the novel which opens with the statement : “The ship sank”. The initial assertion by the narrator’s friend that this will be a story of faith hints that the lifeboat of Pi would be like the Noah’s Ark but it turns out to be a story of ruthless violence and butchery in which the fittest survive.

The story begins in Pondicherry, India and we are introduced to the “main character” Piscine Molitor Patel as a young child of sixteen years. The son of a zookeeper, Pi, has immense knowledge of animal behavior. Further Pi Patel reveals himself to be a unique child with his unusual interest in religion. To the great annoyance of his parents and his religious teachers he becomes a practicing Hindu, Muslim and Christian, all three, at the same time. When the confrontation happens and he is asked to choose one religion he silences the three godmen and stuns his parents by quoting Bapu Gandhi : “All religions are true”(Pg 66). Therefore from the beginning we find Pi as an empathetic character who can appreciate and understand beauty and love in all their varied forms outside his own self. Being a child he is receptive to new ideas, thoughts and objects and his imagination is not deadened by the dry yeastless factuality. It is the empathetic imagination of Pi that makes him such an interesting narrator.

Though the plot proceeds in a linear fashion throughout the book the boundary between

reality and imagination starts fading from the French cook episode onwards. The floating carnivorous island inhabited by meerkats becomes a real challenge for the readers’ suspension of disbelief. The “believable” story that Pi narrates at the end with no animal characters further complicates the truth. The book therefore can be considered a fine example of magical realism wherein the yarns of reality and imagination are intertwined inextricably.

In the mind of Pi the dichotomous ideas of reason and belief exist simultaneously. And when Yann Martel says that after all *Life of Pi* is ultimately a religious novel he has this kind of synthesis in his mind – a rationality that does not kill faith in our minds. It is his rationality that helps him to procure food and shelter for himself and manipulate Richard Parker and it is his faith that motivates him to keep fighting and instills hope in him. A sympathetic cognisance of the other which immediately identifies the beautiful and the appreciative outside and tries to assimilate it within his own self forms the essence of the characterization of the protagonist of the novel. Exasperated by the disbelief of the Japanese investigators Pi retorts, “I applied reason at every moment. Reason is excellent for getting food, clothing and shelter....But be excessively reasonable and you risk throwing out the universe with the bathwater.”(Pg 294)

## THE ANIMALS

The journey of Pi Patel with Richard Parker becomes an encounter with “the other”; the other in the form of Richard Parker and also “the other” within Pi Patel. Yann Martel had remarked in an interview, “Everyone has multiple identities. But because it’s a big complicated sometimes frightening world, we tend to simplify our identity, forgetting that all of us all the time are wearing many, many hats.” Perhaps the animals that are killed and devoured symbolize certain human qualities that had to die within Pi to let him survive his 225 days ordeal on the Pacific Ocean.

Though animals represent human qualities, in a limited sense, they are not humanized at any point of time in the novel. Even Richard Parker, who is the other major character in the novel, remains a tiger – mute, selfish and instinctive- throughout the novel. He does not glance back even once after darting off the boat and running into the forest. He serves as a great source of inspiration for Pi. He wonders at, “the pure animal confidence, the total absorption in the moment. Such a mix of ease and concentration, such a being-in-the-present, would be the envy of the highest yogis.”(pg 176) Significantly for Pi the colour orange of Richard Parker becomes symbolic of the colour of survival since it was not only the colour of Richard Parker but also the whole inside of the boat and the tarpaulin and the life jackets and the lifebuoy were orange. He was the one who brought peace, purpose and in a way the wholeness in Pi’s life at the ocean.

While coming in contact with the other outside, Pi meets the other within. The lesson of ferociousness of the tiger that Pi’s father taught him early in his life perhaps left him scarred, as his mother feared, for the rest of his life. The extreme measures which he seems to have taken for his survival on the lifeboat with the murderous and desperate cook or with the royal Bengal tiger bring to the fore the ruthlessness and ferocity of his own character. Fear, hunger and boredom very soon transform Pi into a savage that he shudders to acknowledge to his own self. He notices with a pinching of the heart that his noisy, frantic, unchewing wolfing-down of raw meat was exactly the way Richard Parker ate. And perhaps his fear of his own savagery compels him to externalize Richard Parker- an entity different from his imagined innocent self. This also explains the sudden disappearance of Richard Parker into the forest. As soon he comes again in contact with the civilization the animal alter ego of Pi subsides into the depths of his subconscious.

## THE OCEAN

Richard Parker is not the only other explored in the novel. The other great companion of Pi in his journey is the Pacific Ocean itself. Pi was christened as Piscine Molitor Patel after the

name of a swimming pool in France. Pi's life had been calm and controlled like the swimming pool after which he was named and he was baffled and terrified when he meets the wild and unruly immensity of the ocean. Therefore the companionship of Pi and the Pacific Ocean is a companionship of ambivalence since the ocean is the life giver as well as the greatest threat to Pi's life :

“...to be a castaway is to be caught up in grim and exhausting opposites. When it is light, the openness of the sea is blinding and frightening. When it is dark, the darkness is claustrophobic ... When it is hot, you are parched and wish to be wet. When it rains, you are nearly drowned and wish to be dry. When there is food, there is too much of it and you must feast. When there is none, there is truly none and you starve.... The opposites often take place at the same moment, so that when the sun is scorching you till you are stricken down, you are also aware that it is drying the strips of fish and meat that are hanging from your lines and that it is a blessing for your solar stills.”(Pg 209)

The description of the sea and the sea life forms a large part of the novel. Unlike Huck and Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* Pi is under no illusion that he controls his boat or his destiny. He understands that he can manipulate Richard Parker but not the ocean and the best strategy for survival for him is to silently drift forward and leave no opportunity that comes in the way unavailed. Thus the story of Pi becomes a detailed chronicle of the vegetation, the fish, the birds and the animals of the sea. The whole of the second part of the novel is an encyclopedia of the ravages and ravishes of the oceanic life. The lightening which almost burnt Pi and his boat is as much awe inspiring for us as it was for Pi. Getting lost at sea with a child, as empathetic as Pi, becomes a kaleidoscopic journey full of the beauty and wonders of the marine life for the readers. The zoological and nautical record of Pi reminds the city dwelling agnostic of the wonders of nature created and ruled by God.

Pi's father had assured him that they will sail like Columbus. Though Pi did not discover a new land he discovers the vitality and variety of marine life. He observes, “ the sea is a city”(Pg 171). What follows is the most exquisite description of the highways, boulevards, streets and roundabouts of this amazing city hustling and bustling with dorados, sharks, dolphins and numerous other wondrous creatures. The empathetic imagination of Pi helps him overcome his pain and grief. The dolphins, whales and the sea birds become harbingers of hope for him – hope of the approaching land or hope of being found. It is his empathetic imagination that keeps him alive and strengthens his faith in God. He resolves that, “I will turn miracle into routine....God is with me”(Pg 143) and indeed his whole journey is not less than a miracle. His battle for survival also serves as a great source of information or rather serves as a practical guide for survival at sea. It is this scientific basis of Pi's miracle that makes it so believable and helps in the suspension of disbelief by the readers.

The greatest challenge to the truth of his story comes in the form of the floating carnivorous island. The whole episode seems to be dreamt out of the “dream rag”. The meerkats and the fresh water ponds appear to be an oasis for the hungry souls and stomachs of Pi and Richard Parker. But it takes him a week to realize what Richard Parker knew since the first day that the soothing green of the island is a snare to allure them to their own destruction. The discovery of the human teeth in the leaves is as much difficult to believe for Pi as it was for the readers. Yann Martel has pointed out that this part of the novel is the greatest test of one's faith in God. The irrationality of Pi's story parallels the irrationality of our belief in God. If we cannot believe in his story we cannot believe in God. Exasperated Pi exclaims to the Japanese investigators, “ If you stumble at mere believability, what are you living for?” (Pg 294)

The empathy for the other that often appears to be daunting and incomprehensible is projected as the best test for one's belief in God in the novel. Pi claims that "religion abounds in stories"(Pg 51) and if we cannot believe in stories how can we believe in religion or God. He further explains, "To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation"(Pg 28). The whole conversation at the end between Pi and the Japanese officials turns absurdist due to the lack of imagination and unwillingness to believe in the officials. Their insistence upon a story without animals prompts Pi to produce a story more bizarre though very similar to the original one making the task of believing even more difficult for the investigators as well as for the readers. Pi advises the investigators, " You can't prove which story is true and which is not. You must take my word for it"(Pg 311). This imploration of the narrator to believe is an attempt by Yann Martel to bring back faith and respect for the other in our lives that is the only solution today to combat violence and intolerance throughout the world.

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### Sugandha S Singh

Asstt. Professor, Deptt. Of English  
S.M.P. Govt. Girls' P.G. College,  
Madhavpuram, Meerut  
Uttar Pradesh, India  
Mobile : 9891354366  
9450872326  
Email : sugandha2606@gmail.com