

# Thematic Study in the Novel The Pi Patel

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## Abstract

*One of the most well-known, adventurous, philosophical, and fantasy fictions among all is Pi Patel that enlightens the readers with an experience of reality along the fantasy elements which defines firmly the concept of religious beliefs. It's author Yann Martel has designed the novel as a microcosm of the world of religious faith and natural world together. And by combining the fact and fiction, he gives a sublime experience to the readers. Since the work is deeply a spiritual exploration, understanding the working of faith is well experimented with two characters, a human and an animal. It provides a definition or meaning to the human existence and the law of nature and by the way it is more philosophical in nature. Not only that, but also it serves to find human being and animals, their role in the environmental. The author has handled religious matters carefully while crafting such an insightful novel which clearly portrays and clarifies the existence of God in a quiet scientific perspective. Moreover, the novel contrasts the animal behaviour with human psychology. Also, the novel paves way to inspect on the elements of realism, spiritualism, supernaturalism, eco-centrism, etc. which makes the work an incredibly best piece of fiction. Hence the paper discloses some of the prominent themes that are very much obvious when reading the novel.*

**Keywords:** Canadian Literature, Religion, Hope, Ecology, Psychology

## Introduction

The novel *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel is an extraordinary novel that gives an adventurous reading experience to the readers that kindles their heart to ponder upon the search for divine existence in nature. The work is very successful that it purifies the readers soul spiritually and scientifically. This philosophical novel can be grouped under multiple of categories as fantasy, Avant-grade, fables, a non visible supernatural element or an unreal magic realism and a post-modern way of depiction. All these elements have created a surprise and wonder while reading the adventurous work. Hence, the paper explores the significance of the story under three dimension such as religion, psychology and ecology which are the essential components of human survival.

Yann Martel was born in Salamanca, Spain on 25th June 1963 to a Canadian parent Nicole Perron, a Diplomat and poet and Emile Martel, a writer and a Canadian diplomat. He grew up in Costa Rica, France, Spain, Mexico and United States. As a traveller, he has visited various places like Iran, Turkey and India. He did his secondary education at Trinity college School in Port Hope, Ontario and received B.A. degree in Philosophy from Trent University in Ontario. In his early days, he did various jobs like washing vessels, planting trees, working as librarian and security guard. He also had the desire to become a politician. As his parents are diplomats, he has been constantly moving from place to place that his travelling to various places has prepared him to venture on writing plays and short stories.

He started his career in writing at the age of 27 which has helped him to earn his life. He turns as one of the most popular Canadian authors by well exploring the power of imagination through writing and has excelled in storytelling. He establishes himself as a prolific writer after publishing his first work *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*, and *Other Stories* in the year 1993 and then the first novel *Self* came in 1996 where he infuses the complexities of illness and sexuality as the central themes. Though he has been publishing few interesting works from 1993, he has gained a higher level of reputation only after publishing his incredible work *Life of Pi* in the year 2002. The novel has gained him “The Man Booker Prize for Fiction” which is a great recognition for the world’s best seller.

The most prolific and dynamic writer Yann Martel encapsules various themes of human experiences that centre on loss, youth hood, morality etc. in his most works. He is known for his unique writing style and novelty in Canadian literary arena that has greatly impacted the global literature as well. He has gained a wider reputation because of his thought-provoking world views and unconventional styles and skills in handling universal themes with multiples of techniques. His works are a blend of humour and seriousness that delights the readers with new taste and flavour. His first book, *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories* is a four-stories collection that exemplifies the theme of war, pain, death and illness and however, it is not sold much. His second book *Self* is published in the year 1996 which is considered as his first novel, and it is not well-received. The novel *Self* deals with sexuality and identity. In addition, it deals with how one construct themselves. In 2002, when he publishes his *Life of Pi*, he reached the public attention because of its freshness in style and context. The popularity has urged him to publish more works and in 2004, he published a collection of stories, *We Ate the Children Last*. In 2010 he published a novel *Beatrice and Virgil* and *The High Mountains of Portugal* his final work that explains the value of faith in one’s life.

The novel *Life of Pi* is a mysterious and adventurous story of Piscine Molitor Patel, a young Indian who is caught in a shipwreck. His survival in

a lifeboat for 227 days becomes the central attention of the novel. The story is divided into three parts that the first part reveals the early life of Pi with his father in the Zoo, the second part deals with the shipwreck and the third part reveals the survival pursuit of Pi and the aftermath of the shipwreck. The story begins with Pi narrating his life events to a writer. He starts the story from his childhood days at Pondicherry and says how he was raised as a Hindu and how he embraced Christianity and Islam. His father is a Zookeeper, and so that he has gained little interest in knowing animal’s psychology. His father once has brought a Bengal tiger to the Zoo and mistakenly it is named as Richard Parker which is the name of its captor, and its original name is Thirsty. Later, Pi’s father plans to settle in Canada and so he decides to sell the zoo. However, he takes most of the animals with them. Pi is 16 years old during the relocation. The voyage starts on June 1977 on a ship named *Tsimtsum*. Unfortunately, the ship is caught in a heavy storm, and it is sinking quickly. Pi is the only human survivor that he catches a lifeboat. Along with him, a zebra and a hyena escape the wreck. Later, an orangutan also jumped into the boat. Pi tries to keep away the animal attacking each other. But the hyena has killed the both. At last, he finds the Bengal tiger named Richard Parker hiding in the boat that killed the hyena. Finally, Pi and Richard Parker remain in the boat and they spend 227 days in the sea. Pi’s morality and religious philosophies contradicted during the survival pursuit that he is a vegetarian and had to eat fish to meet his appetite and his prayers are unanswered by God. So, he becomes little sceptical about his religious belief. However, he gains strength psychologically through his belief in God. At the end, he learns to live with the tiger. The tiger and Pi compliment each other by saving each other from death despite their enmity. The boat finally reaches the shore in Mexico. The tiger leaves him without looking back.

On the ground of religion, the paper examines the theme of religion which is widely spread in the novel. The novel neither criticizes the diverse religious beliefs nor discourages. Rather, it only articulates on the common elements present in all the religions and doctrines. This shows, the venture of the novel is to create a sense of unity among the global citizens in

terms of religious belief. The protagonist of the novel, Pi seems to be a practitioner of Omnism who believes and respects all religion. And, this characteristic is quite similar to the teachings of Baha'i which is a new spiritual movement stresses on the unity of all religions. This movement believes that religions must enable people to understand their own nature. And, the novel *Life of Pi* discloses how Pi manifest his own religious views and knows his role in the universe by embracing many religions. Notably, Pi identifies faith as the only common element that connects all religions and he finds the common element even present with atheist who firmly believes that God doesn't exist. Pi says "It was my first clue that atheists are my brothers and sisters of a different faith. And every word they speak speaks of faith." Pi has a strong religious conviction believing that God is with him and his presence is felt differently as a provider of hope. Pi prays, "Now I will turn miracle into routine. The amazing will be seen every day. I will put in all the hard work necessary. Yes, so long as God is with me, I will not die. Amen." Thus, he understands that mere living is itself as a miraculous work of God. He says "The blackness would stir and eventually go away, and God would remain, a shining point of light in my heart. I would go on loving" (232). This refinement shows his matured understanding of religion. Moreover, Pi wants to break the illusion that all religions conceal. He tries to create an awareness among the people and wants people to come out from the illusions. Pi says,

"But I don't insist. I don't mean to defend zoos. Close them all down if you want (and let us hope that what wildlife remains can survive in what is left of the natural world). I know zoos are no longer in people's good graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both" (*Life of Pi* 19).

The illusion is nothing but believing that animal enjoys freedom in zoo that they get food and protection there. And in the context of spirituality, religions clutches people by its norms although, people stay calm and contented with in the limited boundaries and their thoughts are narrowed. Pi feels liberated spiritually that he is not shackled by the rules rather he has conceived the best extracts from all the religion freely.

The religious views exposed in the novel *Life of Pi* favours the views of Romantics because most romantic poets are nature worshipping pantheists. Wordsworth in his poem "Tintern Abbey," explains the presence of God as, "And I have felt / a presence that disturbs me with the joy / of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime / of something far more deeply interfused", (*Tintern Abbey* 93-94). It suggests that nature is God and God is everywhere. Pi's refined religious understanding is obviously the same and it is evident in all his actions in the sea. Pi says, "Presence of God is the finest of reward" (*Life of Pi* 63). Such spiritual maturity in him developed love for other human being that he has forgiven the French man and has learned tolerance to deal with tiger.

There is a close intertextual connection between the incidents of *Life of Pi* and the incidents of Bible in a quiet different way. In the story of Noah and his ark, there were no survival fight between animals but when Tsintsum gets sunk, the animals quarrelled and the fittest animals alone survived. Secondly, the ark set sailed for 150 days till the water subside but in the story of Pi, it took 227 days to reach the shore. Thirdly, in the story of Noah, the conflict occurred as a consequence against the will of God but in the story of Pi, God's will is questioned. In the poems, "Lamb" and "Tyger", William Blake, the visionary poet questions why the same god has created both lamb and tiger which represents good and evil. Blake says, "What immortal hand or eye / Dare frame thy fearful symmetry... / ..Did he who made the Lamb make thee". He questions the purpose of God's creation of lamb and tiger which represents innocence and experience or mature respectively. He questions the meaning behind such creation, also questions the coexistence of good and evil. Blake tries to solve it by stating that world can't have one without the other. For him tiger represents transcendent mystery that it is the horror of the natural world. Yann's plot supports the view of Blake by experimenting it in his plot. In the *Life of Pi*, the tiger represents evil and the boy represents good. Both were coexisting in the *Life boat* but at the end both have survived. Hence, Blakes statement is proved.

According to bible, the conflict between good and evil has started right from the garden of Eden. God's

wrath has brought a long-standing enmity between human and creatures like snake that Christians sees snake as a symbol of evil. In Genesis 3:15, God has said “Enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent” In the novel, the never-ending fight continues between Pi and the tiger and where tiger is seen as an embodiment of evil. However, Bible preaches for peace and destined to make the universe live in peace. Isaiah 11:6, 7 predicts if there is no evil “Wolves and sheep will live together in peace, and leopards will lie down with young goats. Calves and lion cubs will feed together, and little children will take care of them.... The cow will graze with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.” So, it is to understand that in the absence of Satan, sin and evil, the world will be the ultimate place of peace. But Yann Martel has brought peace possible with the coexistence of good and evil. That, the human and Pi managed to live in peace at the end.

On the ground of ecology, the paper analyses the ecological elements present in the novel. The novel depicts that the predators like tiger are part of the ecosystem. The anthropocentric view sometimes distorts the story rather the central attention must be driven to all the living things in nature, so ecocentrism and biocentrism can be the right perspective to view the story. By the way, it helps to understand the ethics of nature. Moreover, nature is seen having more moral conscience because it is the driving force of all living creature of the world. Here, the natural settings and species become an integral character of the work. The poem “Lamb” and “Tyger” signify the innocence and brutality, however both are created by God. If any of the two doesn’t exist, the entire diversity will be collapsed. Same way, the novel alerts the readers about the importance of opposing forces needed for survival. It is evident that the novel is against the concept of zoo that the idea of preserving the wild species would curb their freedom. It doesn’t mean protection instead it would spoil the ecological balancing. The following lines explain the novel’s advocacy,

“If you went to a home, kicked down the front door, chased the people who lived there out into the street and said, “Go! You are free! Free as a bird! Go! Go!” – do you think they would shout

and dance for joy? They wouldn’t. Birds are not free. The people you’ve just evicted would sputter, “With what right do you throw us out? This is our home. We own it. We have lived here for years. We’re calling the police, you scoundrel.” (Life of Pi -17)

The term ‘survival of the fittest’ is first articulated by Herbert Spencer, after British Naturalist Charles Darwin termed as “Natural selection” in his work *On the Origin of Species* (1869). Darwin states that every organism adjusted to the environment in order to survive. He also uses the term ‘Struggle for existence’. And, according to their theory, every species does their best to survive. However, the healthiest and strongest of all survive. In the same manner, the conflict between Pi and the tiger is a fight for survival. The tiger has proved to be the strongest and healthiest by killing the hyena and it keeps on trying to kill the other survivor, Pi. In the survival spirit, Pi a vegetarian has altered his behaviour and practice eating fish. He also tries to tame the tiger for his comfort. But both their survival fight has kept them alive till they reach the shore. And hence, it is understood that opposite forces are needed for survival. According to Newton’s Third law, “for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction” that states the importance of the existence of opposite forces. It can be better understood in the ecosystem that the Japanese fishing companies add a small shark to each tank to keep the other fish lively and the taste of fresh fish. Thus, the eco system plays an important role in the universe that it regulates the energy flow, supporting life systems and provides stability. And hence, the role of ecosystem is heavily felt in the novel *Life of Pi*.

On the ground of behavioural and psychological study, the paper analyses Yann Martel’s beautiful blend of human and animal’s psychological and emotional experiences. The novel treats the animal as a character equal to the protagonist Pi. Even the name of the tiger makes it clear. Richard Parker, the tiger is the main antagonist in the novel. The internal conflict encountered between them becomes the central attention of the novel. The novel’s ultimate message is keeping the enemy near will help to triumph. Similar to a general saying “Keep your friends close but enemies closer”. Jesus has said in

bible, “Love your enemies.” It is obvious that if the animal died, Pi Patel would also have died and vice versa. It is evident in the words of Pi saying, “The elements allowed me to go on living” (Life of Pi chapter 41). The following lines also prove that Pi has attained psychological and emotional development with the help of tiger. He says in these lines, “A part of me did not want Richard Parker to die at all, because if he died, I would be left alone with despair, a foe even more formidable than a tiger.... Without Richard Parker, I wouldn’t be alive today to tell you my story” (Life of Pi chapter 57).

The 16 years old young boy, after witnessing the death of his family members, being tormented by the disaster, and experiencing all the traumatic incidents, remains stronger because of the strength and motivation he gained through the loss. The culmination of all tragic incidents has shaped him and has resulted in the self-improvement. He has overcome negativity despite the isolation. He behaves humanly with his fellow passengers, that he tried to tame the beastly creature but it doesn’t work every time. He tries to connect with the tiger through the emotional language and half succeeded. He finally realized that understanding of the opposite can make life easier. In many occasions, Pi has expressed his love for the tiger because he identifies the tiger as the only companion when he is completely deserted by everyone. Pi’s behaviour also changed to adapt to the environment by eating fish like animal tearing the flesh of their prey. A kind of animal behaviour he has developed finally to survive.

The psychological and emotional development has happened not only with the human character but also with the animal and it is well captured by Yann Martel. The behaviour of Parker has slightly changed but not completely. Research says that by studying animal behaviour, humans can also learn more about their own behaviour. In the same manner, Pi has learned his role through the animal. In the field of ethology which studies the behaviour of animal, some research has found that animals do have cognitive ability that they think, perceive and react to their environment and experience different emotions. They can communicate emotions to another, but that cannot be considered as language. The interaction between Pi and tiger has resulted in a negative as well

as a positive relationship. “Prusten is the quietest of tiger calls, a puff through the nose to express friendliness and harmless intentions.” Richard Parker makes prusten sound rarely that indicates that he is no harm. Pi learns to understand the vocalization of the tiger as a positive indication. This is how, the novel brings live the emotions of Parker. Science says, animal’s behavioural changes and responses are driven by the urge to survive and reproduce. Under the view of anthropomorphism which means human finding human traits in animals, Pi recognizes human emotions in Parker when it shows little emotional responses for its survival. Contrastingly, zoomorphism means animals treat another species like their own. Dog sees its owner’s leg as a sexual partner and in the same manner, Richard Parker also identifies Pi as its mate in occasions.

To conclude, the study under different grounds such as religion, ecology and psychology gives a clear-cut understanding of the novel and its universal theme and message in terms of scientific, and philosophical perspectives. The paper has argued the important elements other than the adequacy of food for survival with reference to the novel. Those adequate elements are religious belief as a provider of hope for survival, the ecosystem which means life with coexistence of all components such as good and evil and finally the psychological and emotional development which is the central driving force.

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