



A Review on “Life of Pi”

Author : Yann Martel

Publication : Random House of Canada

Price : Rs. 208

*** Dr Ratan Tilak Mohunta**

The novel *Life of Pi* is a fantasy adventure story by the Canadian author Yann Martel published in 2001. However, the story can be read more as a metaphorical narrative that explores the possibility of God's existence. A newspaper review I read when the film adaptation of the book was released somewhere in 2009 drew an analogy between this story and the story of *Robinson Crusoe*. The analogy is not completely out of place, however the methods adopted to explore the theme of survival are vastly different.

Pi Patel is the son of a zookeeper in Pondicherry, India. He is named Piscine Molitor after a Parisian swimming pool visited by his mamaji who had an insatiable passion for swimming. But when kids at school start making fun of him by calling him Pissing, he shortened it to Pi, that familiar figure for the ratio of a circle's circumference divided by its diameter. He says: "And so in that Greek letter that looks like a shack with a corrugated roof, in that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe, I found refuge." In a way, he prefers to identify himself with the irrationality of nature and the universe.

Pi is sometimes uncomfortable at school but very happy at home. He learns that the zoo animals live by habit and, once their basic needs are met, are content to repeat the same rhythms and rituals every day. Change the routine in the slightest way, however, and the animal will express confusion, anger, or retreat into a safe place. He tries to see the divine in all creation including carnivores. In one very scary scene, Pi's father demonstrates that animals are ferocious beasts who are driven by their hunger and instinct. He also teaches the boy about

* Associate Professor of English, St Aloysius College, Mangalore.
Mob: 9845664617

how a circus animal trainer is able to control large animals by assuming the position of the alpha male, demonstrating dominance and an ability to provide for their needs.

Pi's father is an avowed atheist and a rationalist; a product of the enlightenment, with no interest in religion. This teenager, who is a Hindu, finds himself also attracted to Christianity and Islam. Although he thinks that Jesus' ministry can't hold a candle to the exotic adventures of Hindu gods, his message of love seems very important. He keeps meeting a Catholic priest regularly and soon asks to be baptized. Pi also finds Islam to be "a beautiful religion of brotherhood and devotion." After meeting a Sufi mystic in the market, he puts a prayer rug in the garden facing Mecca and prays five times a day. However, once the local leaders of each religion discover what he is doing, they try to convince Pi that he must choose to practice one religion. They tell him that one can't practice many faiths still claim to be a believer; believing in many Gods is as good as not believing any. But Pi continues to believe in a universal, ever loving, amorphous God who is all in one and one in all.

Pi's spiritual journey begins quite early in life when he begins to seek the almighty in all living beings and in the power of nature. He describes this quest thus: "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 a long ways, I suddenly felt I was in heaven. The spot was in fact no different from when I had passed it not long before, but my way of seeing it had changed. The feeling, a paradoxical mix of pulsing energy and profound peace, was intense and blissful. Whereas before the road, the sea, the trees, the air, the sun all spoke differently to me, now they spoke one language of unity. Tree took account of road, which was aware of air, which was mindful of sea, which shared things with sun. Every element lived in harmonious relation with its neighbour, and all was kith and kin. I knelt a mortal; I rose an immortal. I felt like the centre of a small circle, coinciding with the centre of a much larger one. Atman had met Allah."

When Pi's father decides to leave India and move to Winnipeg, Canada, he closes the zoo and arranges to distribute its inhabitants to

other facilities. The family and some of the animals board a Japanese cargo ship. Then the unexpected happens, and the boat sinks in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Pi makes it to a lifeboat where his only companions are a zebra, a hyena, an orangutan, and a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. The sixteen-year-old boy watches horrified as the war begins for supremacy between the animals. In the end, of course, just he and the tiger are left.

Luckily, the lifeboat is stocked with survival supplies and a detailed survival manual. Pi sets up equipment to collect water, learns to fish and catch turtles, and makes a raft for those times when he needs to stay some distance from Richard Parker. Everything he has learned about animals serves him well. In shark-infested waters, with no land in sight, Pi attends to the needs of the 450-pound tiger. This section of Martel's phantasmagorical novel is absolutely enthralling, a true adventure where Pi's physical prowess, intellectual courage, and spiritual perseverance are all tested. At one point, he observes: "For the first time I noticed — as I would notice repeatedly during my ordeal, between one throes of agony and the next — that my suffering was taking place in a grand setting. I saw my suffering for what it was, finite and insignificant, and I was still."

Throughout his journey, Pi practices religious rituals — "solitary Masses without priests or consecrated Communion hosts, darshans without murtis, and pujas with turtle meat for prasada, acts of devotion for Allah not knowing where Mecca was and getting my Arabic wrong." But these provide a stay against despair and loneliness and his grief for his lost family. The worst enemy is fear. He observes:

"It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary, how well I know. It has no decency, respects no law or convention, shows no mercy. It goes for your weakest spot, which it finds with unerring ease. It begins in your mind, always. One moment you are feeling calm, self-possessed, happy. Then, fear, disguised in the garb of mild-mannered doubt, slips into your mind like a spy."

Through the story Martel provides overviews of animal behavior,

survival at sea, the limits of reason, and a boy's coming of age. The novel is a work of spiritual adventurism, an expression of mystical awareness. During his long stay aboard the lifeboat with the Pi is scared that the animal will eat him. Then he tries to keep the tiger happy with food. Pi notes: "My greatest wish — other than salvation — was to have a book. A long book with a never-ending story. One I could read again and again, with new eyes and a fresh understanding each time. Alas, there was no scripture in the lifeboat."

The story ends with Pi landing on the shores of human civilization and very soon the insurance company staff arrive to interrogate the lone survivor of the wrecked ship. They are unwilling to believe Pi's story; they are in search of facts which will prove scientifically the actual cause of the accident. Nevertheless, they are convinced about the storm and are happy to leave Pi with his dream like reality.

The story carries a tinge of postmodern faith where humans make compromises between the crude existential reality of computer generated simulation and belief in extra terrestrial beings. The quest of Pi becomes a quest similar to that of the holy grail. Pi's journey on sea is yet another metaphor for the unstoppable struggle of the human self for recognition from the supernatural. It a journey of self discovery which has been the dominant motif of many Biblical and other theological narratives. In the context of the 21st century where technology and technological rationality seems to overwhelm superstition; the story of Pi makes an attempt to reestablish faith by inverting the logic of science to make the impossible possible.