

The Role of Religion and Morality: Survival in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

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Abstract *Life of Pi*, a novel by Yann Martel, captivates imagination and awareness of the elemental instincts of life. Facing the horrific realities of survival, Pi's moral system is unbearably challenged as a castaway at sea. By balancing the primacy of Pi's survival needs with moral conscience and revealing the dire extent to which creatures will go when faced with extinction, Martel illuminates how miracles may be asserted from a religious-neutral perspective. Pi's pluralistic faith draws upon a moral ethic that is realized to be best felt rather than judged. Storytelling and perception are skilfully utilized by Martel to instil meaning and hope to ritual observances. Pi responsively confronts the extenuating events narrated in the human condition with acknowledgement that the fierce tiger, Richard Parker, metaphorically personifies his connection to nature. Amidst a courageous struggle with faith and reason, the reader is compelled to reflect upon the actions that may be morally acceptable. *Life of Pi*, thus mirrors a transformative journey of hope where fear is alleviated not only by the courage and strength discovered in moral purpose and meaning, but with the support of those who seek to understand their moral nature.

Keywords Religion, Morality, Survival, Story, Metaphor, Conscience, Faith, Hope, Fear, Reason Courage

1. Introduction

In the novel *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, the protagonist, Pi Patel, is stranded on a lifeboat with an orange Bengal tiger named Richard Parker, a hyena, an orangutan and a zebra. As a castaway estranged at sea, Pi struggles for life while faithfully grasping on to what remains of his morality. His life-threatening tribulation is faced amidst despair, as despite gruelling and inhumane circumstances, Pi finds himself confined in a boat living each day with severe rationing of food and drinking water. Marking his territory, Pi finds his place surviving with wild animals that once used to live peacefully in his family's zoo. Pi's religion and morality are tested beyond imagination. While his pluralistic faith in Hinduism, Islam and Christianity enable him to courageously overcome his ordeal, his storytelling parallels a religious belief that not only allows him to survive, but also provides him with a sense of moral conscience and dignity as a human being. As his creation and practice of ritual provides him with the discipline to meet the uncertainties of his demise, Pi is aided by the moral instinct and support of a companion as discovered in the orange Bengal tiger, Richard Parker. Pi is thus able to keep to his religious faith while coming to terms with his life-altering ordeal.

2. The Telling of Stories

Granted the grim reality of his situation, Pi recounts his survival experiences of extreme suffering with a unique method of storytelling. Martel sparks imagination by connecting essential concepts of religion and morality through inspiring faith in the telling of stories. Pi tells two Japanese investigators, in the third part of the novel, an account involving the array of zoo animals who shared the eventful sea voyage with him. Pi also tells the men, however, an alternative version of the story that is the exact opposite of the first. In this account, the animals are replaced with humans. Miracles that capture hope in the first story become instead acts of utter horror and barbarism. As the perspective of the reader often indicates the state of one's spiritual being, those believing in the initial story may tend to favour the existence of God and those believing in the alternative story, respectively, lean towards atheism. Martel suggests that storytelling and perception act together in a way that illustrates how religion and morality both greatly impact Pi's survival.[1] The events of Pi's sea voyage may be too horrible to face directly with the kinds of acts Pi indirectly tells his interrogators. Given the assumption that the human story is factual, anyone, especially a young vegetarian boy, would be tremendously disturbed and traumatized by the horrid series of events that would later necessitate cannibalism. By recasting his story as an incredible tale about humanlike animals inspired by religion, Pi is able to

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Published online at <http://journal.sapub.org/edu>

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see a more morally ethical approach to face the tragic conditions that were thrust upon him on the small lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

3. Ritual Observances

While storytelling acts as a means of survival, the ritual that follows a structured religion also keeps Pi alive. Religion may be defined as a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe[...] usually involving devotional and ritual observances and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.[2] A key aspect of religion is the practice of a ritual and therefore plays an obvious and important role in Pi's survival. Because a ritual gives structure to abstract ideas and emotions and may in fact be viewed as an alternate form of storytelling, Pi is able to come to terms with Richard Parker through his training for the Bengal tiger to become a companion as opposed to a potentially lethal enemy. Also, Pi establishes early on in the novel that zookeepers can tell if something is wrong with their animals by noticing small changes in their daily routines. As animals are creatures of habit as are people, Pi's everlasting faith and devotion to his belief in God allows him to find common ground in three different religions. Christianity, Hinduism and Islamic religions teach him the importance of following a habitually practiced and organized schedule. Ritual observances further allow Pi to become familiar with the conditions of his own survival. Pi says, "I know zoos are no longer in people's good graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both." [3] According to Pi, while animals caged behind metal bars of a zoo appear to be trapped, the animals may instead be more free, as they are provided with daily shelter, food and protection. Although committing to a religion may seem similarly restricting, the discipline offered by ritual, in fact, guides Pi to focus on overcoming his ordeal.

As Pi searches vigilantly for life-changing opportunities, his moral conscience may further be viewed in the context of signifying the territorial nature of survival. Pi differentiates his territory from Richard Parker's by demarcating boundaries. Given the small size of the lifeboat, boundaries ensure a relatively peaceful relationship between Pi and Richard Parker. Richard Parker provides essential survival value to Pi both as a companion and as an obstacle. To Pi's advantage, although Richard Parker's presence at first appears to be a death sentence, the obstacle symbolized by Richard Parker as realized by Pi is surmountable. Pi is able to overcome the challenge by taming Richard Parker while benefiting tremendously by avoiding the great despair that he would otherwise have experienced when confronting the loss of his close family members. Pi appears to have awakened, therefore, to the recognition that without Richard Parker, he would not have survived. His religious faith and morality spurred on by his survival instinct allows him to stay alive

during his oceanic ordeal by creating habits and daily rituals that help sustain him.

4. The Role of Morality and Religion

As Richard Parker may, in fact, be seen as an aspect of Pi's own personality, the idea that a distinct boundary can be put up through ritual between Pi and Richard Parker is symbolic of Pi's need to morally acknowledge his tiger-like, violent character. It may be conceived that Pi's civilized, moral, human side stands in opposition and partnership with his animalistic nature. With the merging and resolution of interests of man and beast as enemy and ally, Pi's experience respectfully reflects the bipolar human condition that exists between fear and hope. Pi's observance of ritual provides him with a sense of meaning and hope in a way that allows him to confront his fears with courage. Following a perpetual, horrific and excruciating challenge to his religious practice, Pi finds himself accepting his vulnerabilities as shared in the human condition.[4] Martel appears to compel not so much belief in God, but support and empathy for the suffering of people who look for understanding.

The challenge to overcome his ordeal and survive allows Pi to reflect upon the basic human qualities that connect him to his larger sense of self as found in himself, others and in nature. By retelling the story of his experiences with animals, Pi is able to alleviate the need to confront the true cruelty that human beings may actually be capable of. Martel seems to say that morality may be best felt with a clear conscience as opposed to being judged, by preparing readers to see the miracles in life from a religion-neutral perspective. As Pi pursues his relentless quest for understanding towards unravelling the mystery of his being and God, his embrace of an open and relentlessly inquisitive mind is found with recognition that atheists, although of a different faith, are in fact his brothers and sisters with a common shared experience. Pi recognizes the sincerity of atheists in seeking truth through reason and evidence. He, however, remains keenly aware that at some point, faith must take over, as faith allows Pi to confront his fears and realize hope with his connection to nature.

Pi appears to have contemplated that perhaps an eternal being is not complete until it can experience limitation. This acknowledgement may reflect his resignation to an inquiry into the possibility of understanding the fullness of an all-knowing God. It may be asked, if you have an all-knowing God, how can God know limitation? Granted diverse worldviews and religions that Pi has immersed himself in, Pi appears to have recognized his vulnerabilities, while embracing discovery in the sharing of experience through his observations. As his inquiry brings him closer to animals and the ecology that he is a part of, Pi's perpetual sense of humility upholds a sense of mystery that comes between faith and reason. Thus, taking a leap of faith and losing himself in a story of humans and living creatures may

be to Pi most realized by regaining a consciousness that reunites with the eternal in gaining completion.[5]

With acceptance of different faiths, Pi acknowledges understanding of unity in diverse voices, while allowing others to make their own conclusions--a process that sees faith and reason as, perhaps, protagonists rather than adversaries from which to choose. As expressed by Dr. Brené Brown, faith and reason may perhaps be seen as best friends and as "...a place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty." [6] On the other hand, for Martel, fear and hope, while related extremities, may be seen in a different light. Pi discovers in his journey that fear drives hope and asserts moral purpose and meaning to life. However, although Pi claims to have never lost faith in God when confronting his fears, his faith is clearly challenged. He becomes too weak to perform his religious rituals regularly and he allows his need to survive to overpower his moral system. He eats meat, kills living animals, and perhaps even goes so far as to eat human flesh.[7] Martel shows just how far creatures will go when confronting extinction. The reader is led to reflect on Pi's extenuating efforts to overcome his ordeal and to reflect upon the kinds of actions that may be morally acceptable in such an appalling life-or-death situation.

5. The Human Condition

Pi's loss of innocence in overcoming his ordeal is a realization that Martel brings to light not from one religious perspective over another but to compel the reader to reflect upon the human condition towards finding meaning and hope. While all beliefs face the test of experience and Pi finds common ground in the spirituality and miracles of religious pluralism, it is evident that Pi himself uses his rational intellect to take him as far as he can go. However, all storytellers—Pi and Martel included—require the audience's trust and belief. Pi's position to convince the sceptical Mr. Okamoto that his imaginative story is true is argued from the perspective that it is the better story. While Martel appears to inspire all to be open with the moral conscience that arises with ritual and storytelling, the strength of Pi's argument is, however, not directly reflective of a rational statement about absolute truth.

An implication that arises from Pi's reflective position is that belief in stories allows for a connected moral conscience to the world around us. The structure given to our understanding of the universe and our place in it mirrors the hopes, values and meaning inherent in stories. Intrinsic values instil life meaning in ways that facts based solely on observation cannot. As Pi's interactions exude an idyllic life of wondrous contemplation while emanating a spiritual presence, his inquisitive nature charms with humour rather than alienates with facts. It may be realized that as Pi reflectively confronts his emotions, his survival instinct kept his body alive so that his spirituality could exist as well.

Martel appears to indicate that one resorts to variants on reality, not only because such fictions give one a reason to look forward, but also because they provide one with the faith where the journey is worth suffering and the joy in life is worth the struggle.

One may also question the comfort in an existence that has no meaning to reason, and ask how life would be like in a world that is merely random or factual. For one who is self-aware and rational, faith in a belief may then be viewed as the bridge between fact and the warmth of emotion. As just as the qualia of love may be hard to perceive and one may believe when one asks any person who has been captured by it, so indeed, God is difficult to perceive as one may also believe when one asks a believer. Martel informs the reader to become aware of how nature presents and emerges upon itself, as the ability to believe may therefore be seen as a hallmark of consciousness awareness. Miracles of story might then be conceived to retain a theory of natural laws while remaining open to events which lie outside the capacity of nature.[8]

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, Martel brings awareness to the elemental instincts of life by balancing the primacy of Pi's survival needs with his morality and religion. A question that may be pondered is how, when faced with survival, people will not only do inhumane and barbaric acts if pressed, but will also draw upon faith and hope to a deep sense of moral conscience. In the midst of survival and in the context of fear, Pi raises the possibility that the fierce tiger, Richard Parker, may symbolize the survival instinct of his own personality. As the reader becomes aware that Pi himself may be responsible for some of the horrific events that he has narrated, it may be realized that survival trumps a courageous moral conscience that tests the state of one's practiced religion. While each of Pi's three religions, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam, come with their own tales, it is apparent that each of these stories might simply be aspects of a greater, universal story about the human condition. Martel appears to suggest that we have an intrinsically moral nature in our religious beliefs and in the long run, we shape our lives, and we shape ourselves with a truth that is relative to the believer. The process never ends and the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility. As *Life of Pi* begins with an old man in Pondicherry who tells the narrator, "I have a story that will make you believe in God," indeed, storytelling and religious belief may be viewed as a larger ritual that offers the freedom of a moral choice. As Pi becomes depressed about Richard Parker's desertion, it is clear that he believes in his mythical story. Overcoming and surviving an ordeal may then not only necessitate confronting excruciating fear, but may be found in realizing that glimmer of hope offered by faith. Pi's enduring pursuit to survive, therefore, needs no reassurance except through the morality as embraced by the personal

choice of his practiced religion.

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