



Yann Martel's "Life of Pi": A Quest for Meaningful Existence

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Abstract

Yann Martel's acclaimed novel, "Life of Pi," serves as a profound exploration of the sensibilities that characterise 21st-century society. The narrative follows the journey of Pi Patel, a young Indian boy marooned on a lifeboat in the vast Pacific Ocean, accompanied only by a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. Pi's ordeal in the novel serves as a lens through which to examine essential facets of the modern human experience, including the quest for meaning amidst the complexities and anxieties of contemporary existence. In today's world, materialism and technological progress often prove inadequate in providing genuine fulfilment. The novel portrays Pi's embrace of various religious traditions, highlighting the contemporary trend towards eclecticism and the pursuit of personal significance that transcends conventional boundaries. For Pi, faith becomes an anchor, empowering him to discover inner strength and surmount the challenges he encounters during his arduous journey. This paper underscores the potential of spirituality to infuse individuals with a sense of purpose, hope, and interconnectedness in an increasingly fragmented and uncertain world.

Keywords: religion, spirituality, materialism, nature, faith, contemporary society



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Ours is a materialistic age where feelings and personal relations do not hold much significance. One may call it a kind of spiritual desolation. Living each moment, anxious about the next, constantly jostling from one task to another, everyday life seldom leaves room for thought. Living in a world seemingly indifferent to our suffering, we learn not to take an additional burden of thinking. We throw ourselves into work, dealing with one crisis after another, constantly in motion. What happens when this mindless and endless rigamarole is forced to come to a halt, suddenly filling our days with silence, inactivity, and solitude?

Every day, as we relentlessly push the boulder of responsibility atop the hill of life, only for it to roll down again, we are born again. When Albert Camus famously remarked "One must imagine Sisyphus happy", he perceived the otherwise mundane human existence as joyous. We live to be enriched by a life that is as much our own as it is of the people we love. The meaning of life is that which we ascribe to it. Existence is a deeply personal experience, unique to all. And it remains for us to find out the purpose in life and seek inspiration for pushing our boulder again the next day.

Yann Martel, a Spanish-born Canadian author, explores profound existential dilemmas in his acclaimed work, "Life of Pi." Published in 2001 and recipient of the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2002, the novel's popularity led to its adaptation into a film too. Comprising a hundred chapters divided into three parts, "Life of Pi" narrates the tale of a four-member family, consisting of a husband, wife, and their two sons. Notably, the father, a modernist, who operates a zoo in Pondicherry, does not impose any religious beliefs upon his children.

Piscine Molitor Patel, affectionately known as "Pi," takes pride in identifying himself as both a Catholic and a Hindu, symbolising his unique spiritual journey. His initial exposure to religion occurs within the confines of his home, where he is immersed in the teachings of Hinduism. However, driven by a sense of curiosity, Pi ventures outside of his familiar faith and engages in conversations with a priest at a church, seeking a deeper understanding of Christianity. At the tender age of twelve, Pi grapples with the perplexity of why a father would



sacrifice his son to atone for the sins of others. Subsequently, Pi embarks on another spiritual exploration, this time visiting a mosque in an attempt to experience Islam.

Raised with an open and accepting mindset by his father, Pi is encouraged to forge his own path in matters of faith. Despite encountering various religious traditions, it is Hinduism that attracts Pi the most, and he develops his own personal interpretation and belief system in life.

Driven by socio-political circumstances, Pi's family makes the difficult decision to relocate to Canada, resulting in the sale of their beloved zoo. Tragically, their journey takes a disastrous turn as the ship they are aboard, succumbs to a watery grave. Miraculously, Pi finds himself among the survivors, accompanied by four animals. Endowed with unwavering faith in a higher power, unyielding resilience, and indomitable survival instincts, the young boy manages to endure over two hundred arduous days adrift at sea, confined to a lifeboat.

Throughout this harrowing ordeal, Pi's steadfast connection with his faith sustains him, bolstering his determination to survive against all odds. Among the surviving animals, a particular presence endures alongside Pi; Richard Parker, a formidable tiger. The boy and the tiger are a very unusual company. Over time, an extraordinary bond forms between Pi and Richard Parker, wherein the tiger learns to coexist submissively within the confines of their shared journey.

This journey becomes a spiritual journey for Pi. His surrender to the Almighty God when going gets tough on the turbulent sea, his perspective on religion, his concern for animals especially the wild tiger who travels in the same boat with him, and his love for classical dance that Anandi performs - all this reflects his spiritual evolvment. Of course, outlasting death is not easy. As Friedrich Nietzsche said, "One has to pay dearly for immortality; one has to die several times while one is still alive." (2)

Only, Pi died a million deaths so resilience could live.

Pi evolves through his exploration of different religions and their philosophies. He realises that religion is more than mere rites and rituals. He calls himself a Hindu as the universe makes sense to him through Hindu eyes.



Pi believes that Brahman is expressed not only in gods but in humans, animals, trees, and in a handful of earth, for everything has a trace of the divine in it. The truth of life is that Brahman is no different from atman, the spiritual force within us, what one might call the soul. He says: “The individual soul touches upon the world soul like a well reaches for the water table”.(Martel 48)

This, according to him, is Hinduism, and he has been a Hindu all his life. At the same time, the protagonist cautions:

“But we should not cling! A plague upon fundamentalists and literalists! “

(Martel 49)

When Pi’s story of living with tiger, strange animals and trees is not believed by two Japanese investigators, he bluntly avers:

“Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem?”

(Martel 297)

When the investigators implore Pi to be more logical and reasonable while narrating the strange events, he gets angry. He says that reason is excellent for getting food, clothing and shelter. The reason is the very best tool kit. Nothing beats a reason for keeping tigers away. “But be excessively reasonable and you risk throwing out the universe with the bathwater.” (Martel 298)

Treading on the same line of thinking, in the early nineteenth century, William Wordsworth sought an escape in nature. He was exasperated with the harsh realities of materialism and industrialisation. He proclaims in “The Tintern Abbey”:

I have felt

A presence that disturbs me with joy

Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime. (Fifteen Poets,237)



Disgusted with the prevalent corruption in the church of England, the poet preferred to be called a Pagan:

Great God! I'd rather be

A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn; (Fifteen Poets,240)

Doesn't this frustration and anxiety resonate with us in the present times of religious fanaticism prevalent in the world? Transcending the spatio-temporal boundaries, there arises a frantic search for inner peace. W. B. Yeats writes in "The Second Coming" (1929),

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world

And W H Auden seems to come up with the answer: Life remains a blessing, though you cannot bless it.

Therefore, one must seek inner peace, harmony, and a sense of interconnectedness with the world, however chaotic it may appear. The vastness of the universe is like a never ending sea, and through finding meaning in our everyday life, we gain some tether to the shore of peace. Individuals may find solace through practices such as meditation, mindfulness, prayer, contemplation, self-reflection, or engaging with nature. This internal inquiry into our minds will help us understand ourselves better. In "The Alchemist", Paulo Coelho writes - And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.

In the world of social media today, there is no end to the dissemination of knowledge and techniques that tell us to live a peaceful life. Life generally, is full of existential pain, and suffering. And quite often in the absence of proper education as well as adequate economic support, it is not possible to cope with problems in a rational way. Different classes deal with their dilemmas in different ways. A woman coming from a rural background may fall prey to the magical powers of a Baba or a guru. In an uneven and heartless society, the poor and the exploited need some psychological assurance to live.



Likewise, for the suave and savvy, ambitious upper class, ‘success’ comes at a heavy price. As Wordsworth says - “The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.” This class uses time for ‘productive’ purposes only, leaving no spare time for themselves. As life is seen to be linear with a set of goals or targets to be achieved. There is no freedom from the anxiety of ‘tomorrow’. As in “The Waste Land”, a lady, despite all her riches, is a victim of neurosis and anxiety. Her constant question is:

What shall we do tomorrow, what shall we ever do?

Stress, fear, mistrust, hyper-competitiveness, chronic nervousness and psychic restlessness characterise the modern man who loves his crooked neighbour with his crooked heart. And this emotional turmoil continues to haunt him, even if he seeks to escape from this void through instantaneous consumption, sexual gratification or intoxication with social media. The market of ‘spiritual’ practices’ provides a ‘feelgood’ experience - yes, temporarily. But no efforts are put in to strike the root cause of the spiritual emptiness. They continue to run like rats in a race; however, once in a while, spend ten days in a meditation camp to ‘detox’ their mind.

The neo-liberal assault on culture, environment, education and human relationships poses different challenges in the path of the quest for meaning. Sadly, what we witness today is the separation from our ancient knowledge system. As John Milton writes - The mind is its own place and in itself can make a hell of heaven or a heaven of hell. We find ourselves amid ritualistic priestcraft and social conservatism. Albert Camus writes: The modern mind is in complete disarray. Knowledge has stretched itself to the point where neither the world nor our intelligence can find any foot-hold. It is a fact that we are suffering from nihilism.

They say that in life, two and two do not make four. One cannot use the cold and hard truths of science to explain meaningful existence. Virginia Woolf writes beautifully - “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; Life is a luminous halo.” The human experience, in its grandeur and fragility, is often faced with the overwhelming realisation that we are mere pawns within the cosmic universe. Our existence holds no prospect of triumph or defeat, for the universe forever remains indifferent to all our endeavours. Unlike the mythical tortured souls burdened by rolling boulders or bound by chains under the relentless grip of



eagles, the mortal fate is one of eternal aimlessness. Humans are condemned to wander the desolate asphodel for all of eternity. Every hope and dream we hold dear is met neither with approval or disdain, but with a chilling and hollow indifference.

In life, as well as in death, we find ourselves resigned to a destiny of mediocrity, trapped within a ceaseless and disordered cosmos that disregards our very existence, unyielding to our pleas for relief. And yet, paradoxically, amidst this vast emptiness that engulfs us, we discover a peculiar solace. Our suffering is self-imposed, limited only to the boundaries we allow ourselves to experience. Furthermore, our comfort and solace emanate solely from the tenderness and compassion we extend to our fellow beings, for in this abyss of meaninglessness, we find solace not in the cosmos but in one another. One has to become empty and light, radiate love and compassion, and live peacefully even amid bodily pain and temporality of everything ephemeral, be it material wealth or the presence of loved ones.

This reminds one of T.S. Eliot's The Wasteland-like situation Man will only find peace when he learns to live in conformity to those laws which decree his human nature.

Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata

Shantih! Shantih! Shantih!

This is the panacea to all our sufferings in life. The poet reiterates the point further:

By this and this only, we have existed

Which is not to be found in our obituaries.

Undoubtedly, literature serves a crucial role in facilitating intellectual emancipation, particularly within the context of the modern era where we don't know what to believe. Ours is an age of transition. The old order has changed and the new is yet to find its foothold. In this age, the determination of our character is shaped not solely by knowledge, but by our conduct. It is through our conduct that our true nature is revealed and embodied. As Shakespeare eloquently asserts, the culmination of wisdom lies in the state of ripeness, wherein one's character attains its fullness and maturity.

Stranded in the middle of nowhere, fighting every second for a shot at survival, our protagonist, Pi, takes an unexpected mental detour to spirituality. Unencumbered by the woes



and materialistic attachments, Pi turns to his inward self. It is through this detachment that he truly discovers the meaning of life. Thus breaking through the rigmarole, this forced shift in perspective changes his life forever, and the reader's too, along with him. Pi's quest for survival for two hundred days, on the huge, endless sea makes him obliterate all other questions of life. With Pi's arrival at the seashore, now it is our turn to take a cue from the book of his ordeal and continue our quest in life.

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