

Yann martels life of pi 2001 literature essay



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Yann Martel's Booker-Prize winning novel *Life of Pi* (2001) narrates the nine months' odyssey of Piscine Patel on the Pacific Ocean. Far from being only a fascinating adventurous tale, this novel addresses important issues such as faith, identity, universalism, religion, and areas of cultural contact. Although the plot may seem to revolve mainly around Pi and Richard Parker, *Life of Pi* deals extensively with the "great human project of trying to live together." By using Pi as his trans-cultural hero, Martel seems to insist on the need to constructively reformulate the human mind in relation to cosmopolitanism, absolute truth and religious identity. This paper's aim is to bring out the cosmopolitan message that Martel seeks to transmit to his readers and to show how the latter focuses on that part of our common human identity that links us, instead of stressing on those identities that only partially define and differentiate us. A cross-reference is also going to be made to Homer's *The Odyssey* so as to highlight the idea of the equal treatment of all human beings, regardless of religion, culture, ethnicity and values, as prescribed by cosmopolitanism.

Life of Pi is a novel which can be read in many different ways; as an adventurous story, as an allegory of power, as a reflection on the superiority of imagination over reason, as an explanation of the intricate and complex life of humans and animals, and, of utmost importance to this essay, as a spiritual journey or a quest for identity and as a metaphor of the cultural and religious conflicts that characterize every known human society.

Culture and identity play a key role in many contemporary wars. Many philosophers and cultural theorists argue that the resolution of protracted ethnic and religious conflicts lies in the fostering and nurturing of

cosmopolitan identities. First of all, what makes Life of Pi an interesting platform for exploring trans-cultural and interfaith relationships is not merely Martel's cosmopolitan background, but also the novel's portrayal of the protagonist's life before and after the shipwreck. Pi Patel grows up in Pondicherry, a former French territory on the Indian subcontinent, where Eastern and Western cultures inevitably exist in close contact. To the dismay of grownups, particularly the representatives of different religions, the "wise men" as they are almost satirically referred to in the novel, Pi shows devotion to Hinduism, embraces and practices Christianity and Islam simultaneously. After his nine months in the lifeboat, he is hospitalized in Mexico and the author finally encounters him as an Indian immigrant in Toronto. Pi's hybrid, multiple faiths and open-mindedness not only help him survive emotionally and physically but are also strengthened after the events. His house in Canada can be used as a proof to support this statement; the author describes the devotional articles that he finds in the protagonist's house, ranging from "a framed picture of Ganesha," "a plain wooden cross," "a small framed picture of the virgin Mary of Guadalupe," to "a framed photo of the black-robed Kaaba, holiest sanctum of Islam." Pi is therefore presented as a cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world, as he not only practices three religions but is also at home in the worlds of science and theology, having achieved university degrees in both fields.

Martel juxtaposes the young Pi Patel's receptiveness to other cultures and religions to the intolerance of the three religious figures encountered on the beach; the priest, the imam and the pandit, each convinced of the singular truth of the path he taught. Each of them apoplectically try to impose the '

superiority' and ' validity' of their respective faiths after discovering that Pi shows devotion to three different, opposing, and often conflicting religions;

The priest looked askance at both of them. " Piscine," he nearly whispered, " there is salvation only in Jesus."

" Balderdash! Christians know nothing about religion," said the pandit.

" They strayed long ago from God's path," said the imam.

" Where's God in your religion?" snapped the priest. " You don't have a single miracle to show for it. What kind of religion is that, without miracles?"

" It isn't a circus with dead people jumping out of tombs all the time, that's what! We Muslims stick to the essential miracle of existence. Birds flying, rain falling, crops growing-these are miracles enough for us."

" Feathers and rain are all very nice, but we like to know that God is truly with us."

" Is that so? Well, a whole lot of good it did God to be with you-you tried to kill him! You banged him to a cross with great big nails. Is that a civilized way to treat a prophet? The prophet Muhammad-peace be upon him-brought us the word of God without any undignified nonsense and died at a ripe old age."

" The word of God? To that illiterate merchant of yours in the middle of the desert? Those were drooling epileptic fits brought on by the swaying of his camel, not divine revelation. That, or the sun frying his brains!"

Whereas Pi “ just [wants] to love God”, the three religious leaders represent those who insist on believing in one, absolute truth. This situation of “ world-wide coalition of cultures” as Claude Levi- Strauss termed it, can be further elaborated using Richard Burton’s famous words;

All Faith is false, all Faith is true;

Truth is the shattered mirror strown

In myriad bits; while each believes

His little bit the whole to own.

Like Burton, Martel implies that absolute truth is inaccessible to human beings, who will probably never be able to understand it fully. Therefore, adhering slavishly and blindly to one faith without “ taking an interest in the practices and beliefs” of others only contributes to “[obstruct] empathy and [makes] ethnocentrism inescapable.” The problem with most human beings and civilizations, as highlighted in Life of Pi and as extensively discussed by Appiah, appears to be that everyone believes that their particular faith is the all-comprehending and absolute truth. Everyone seems to be holding their little bit of their “ shattered mirror,” guarding it protectively (almost jealously) from others and trying to see as much as they can in it. Gilroy describes such a situation as being one in which “ we are all sealed up inside our frozen cultural habits” and where there is “ no workable precedent for adopting a more generous and creative view of how human beings might communicate or act in concert across racial, ethnic, or civilizational divisions.” What Appiah in turn proposes to cultural and religious differences

reflects Pi's own ideologies. For Appiah therefore, there is "no agreed-upon answer- and the point is there doesn't need to be." He urges that it is of central importance for the benefit of humanity that we all learn "about people in other places, take an interest in their civilizations, not because that will bring us to agreement, but because it will help us get used to one another." In this sense, Pi's behavior towards Richard Parker can be read as a metaphor used to promote or idealize a cosmopolitan ideology among human beings.

Appiah also carefully points out that we can perfectly "live together without agreeing on what the values are that make it good to live together." If the world could share their "myriad bits," human beings would have definitely been able to see a lot more clearly. Similarly, there exists no singular truth. There are many truths, depending on our moralities and experience. As Pi reproaches to Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba twice at the end of the novel;

Tigers exist, lifeboats exist, oceans exist. Because the three have never come together in your narrow, limited experience, you refuse to believe that they might. Yet the plain fact is that the Tsimtsum brought them together and then sank.

And at some later point in the same conversation,

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 with hard to believe?"

Pi here implies that openness and the taking of interest in other's lives and experiences are more enriching to human beings rather than further entombing themselves in what they believe is the absolute truth, thereby turning their own lives into "yeastless factuality." In spite of all his misadventures though, Pi not only remains faithful to all three religions but also admires the religious as well as the irreligious. Readers cannot disagree therefore with Pi's statement that "to choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation." Similarly, closing ourselves into our set of beliefs and closing all doors to the appreciation of other cultures, civilizations and people is akin to living without any enriching human and cultural progress.

Sharing a lifeboat with a tiger for 227 days is considered as quasi-impossible both to believe and as a thing likely to occur. However, Martel beautifully uses imagination over reason to 'drag' his readers in a kind of magical realism tour which requires a strong yet willing suspension of disbelief so as to show that such a thing is plausible and was actually experienced by the hero of his novel. Pi renounces to the initial idea of murdering Richard Parker because he realizes that if he does so, he will have no one to provide for, no one to depend on him and no reason at all to live. Thereupon, the tiger shifts from being a source of fear and a mortally threatening creature to a source of "peace, purpose... even wholeness." What Pi does therefore is that he uses his understanding of animals, acquired at the zoo, so as to establish a peaceful cohabitation between himself and Richard. According to June Dwyer, Pi's success lies in the fact that he respects the 'Other's' instincts, needs and 'values' and gives him equal consideration; it is "acceptance of

the Other without imposing change on him." Since Richard has already claimed his part in the lifeboat, Pi decides to negotiate. So, instead of killing, he shares and instead of giving up his authority he makes it clear to the tiger what is his by also urinating on his territory. The tiger in turn, much to Pi's surprise, reacts positively to the latter's whistle-blows. What Martel is trying to show here is that the human and the tiger are capable of living together (even in a lifeboat with limited space) as long as each respects the other's space. If two completely different creatures are able to live together peacefully, by making compromises and respecting each other, then it becomes very much possible for cosmopolitanism among humans to be completely disregarded as a mere set of utopian ideals, as is often claimed by many, or, put in simpler terms, to be seen as a 'realistic utopia', as Nancy Fraser puts it.

Likewise, Homer's most enduring hero, Odysseus, celebrates "someone seeking adventure and valuing the unfamiliar and the strange." According to one definition, cosmopolitanism represents the attempt to exhibit "a familiarity with, or appreciation of many parts and peoples of the world..." This definition aptly applies to both Life of Pi and The Odyssey. Much like Pi himself, Odysseus is also shipwrecked, which leads him to encounter different people, civilizations, cultures and languages. We witness for example his admiration for the Phaiakians at some point in the book, and we see how he admires the latter's polity. The simple swineherd Eumaeus, remarkable for his apparent striking similarity to Odysseus, also helps to better understand the shared human condition at that time. According to Patrick Deneen, Eumaeus's understanding of the situation of humanity

relative to the gods is similar to that of Odysseus himself. This understanding leads to his realization that the human condition leads one to recognize that the parts of our human identity that link us outnumber those identities that differentiate us. As he says to Odysseus, whom he meets as a begger, upon their first encounter,

Stranger, I have no right to deny the stranger, not even

if one came to me who was meaner than you. All vagabonds

and strangers are under Zeus, and the gift is a light and dear one...

Readers are thus able to see how Eumaeus, as well as Odysseus, recognize the protection that Zeus accords to all human beings, even to the most desperate ones. Since readers are able to travel through different civilizations, cultures, mindsets and values in *The Odyssey*, comparisons between those who show “ kindness to strangers” and those who do not (such as in the case of Polyphemus, Poseidon’s son) are made possible. In this sense, Telemachus’s meetings with Nestor and Menelaus also allow Homer to explore the Greek code of *xenia*, or hospitality. As Bernard Knox argues in the introduction to Robert Fagles’s translation of *The Odyssey*, the obligation of attending to and entertaining travelers is “ the closest *The Odyssey* comes to affirming an absolute moral principle”. This also reminds of Nussbaum’s most explicit description of the duties or ‘ obligations’ of any citizen of the world;

Our task as citizens of the world, and as educators

who prepare people to be citizens of the world, will be to “ draw the circles somehow toward the center,” making all human beings like our fellow city dwellers. In other words, we need not give up our special affections and affiliations and identifications, whether national or ethnic or religious; but we should work to make all human beings part of our community of dialogue and concern, showing respect for the human wherever it occurs, and allowing that respect to constrain our national and local politics.

Likewise, the social code of ancient Greek necessitated that one expresses kindness to strangers in foreign regions by receiving them into one’s home. This social expectation of hospitality was so culturally crucial and significant that it was believed to be implemented by Zeus, the king of the gods. Both hosts offer their guest a warm welcome even before they learn Telemachus’s identity. Furthermore, this adherence and respect for the social norms enforced by the gods sharply demarcates Penelope’s careless wooers’ plundering of Telemachus’s home in Ithaca from Telemachus and Odysseus. Homer sets the right against the wrong by portraying the latter as hero and the suitors as villains. Although it is set in 700 BC, *The Odyssey* certainly sheds light on contemporary debates about cosmopolitanism. Martel on the other hand beautifully uses Pi as the hero of his novel, so as to transmit the innocent yet strong cosmopolitan and universal visions of a child, thereby providing more hope for a cosmopolitan future for the new generations.

On a conclusive note, it can be noted that what Martel in a way wants his readers to know is that the ‘ persistent barriers’ of doubt, fear of the Other, ignorance, close-mindedness, racism and imaginative, long- held stereotypes are only vicious obstacles to the creation of a cosmopolitan world and fruitful

human relations. In order for the human experience to progress therefore, these constant obstacles have to be destroyed. Indeed this book seems to suggest that the most appropriate and beneficial perspective to be adopted in the 21st century is one of cosmopolitanism.