

The issue of mortality in the life of pi



In *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel juxtaposes issues of morality alongside the primitive necessity of survival. Pi's life-threatening experiences while stranded on the Pacific Ocean threaten the integrity of his morals and beliefs. His pluralistic faith demonstrates that morality is less about one specific religion, and more about the preservation of one's dignity, humanity and self-respect. As Pi finds himself in a dire conflict between faith and reason, Martel asks the reader to consider what actions are moral or immoral when facing potential extinction. Pi's transformation from a benevolent human being into a bestial survivor—as well as his ultimate redemption— suggests that morality is likewise malleable according to the circumstances, and that a moral code itself is a flexible entity which is preserved in the mind of the individual according to free will and perception.

Pitted against deadly circumstances, Pi fights to survive while clinging to his sense of morality through various means, including illusory storytelling that blurs the line between reality and fiction. Upon telling two stories to investigators in the third part of the book, Pi asks, “ So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you and you can't prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?” (Martel 295). Martel suggests that the true depths of human nature can be too grotesque and frightening to face without a shield of altered perception. This need for adaptation is demonstrated when Pi offers two accounts of his experience at sea. Martel purposefully leaves the reader unsure of which story is true, attesting to the hazy line between what is real and what is not. While his faith in multiple religions offer him the strength and courage to overcome his horrific ordeal,

his altered means of recollection mimics another strand of religion that lends him not only increased strength, but also a sense of morality and dignity in the face of unfathomable conditions. Furthermore, Pi relegates the darker elements of his character, such as “ selfishness, anger, ruthlessness,” into Richard Parker (391). The reader is left uncertain as to whether the tiger is an actual separate entity or merely a facet of Pi’s own personality that emerged at the threat of extinction. Richard Parker serves as an indication of the need to distinguish between opposing sides of one’s character by outwardly projecting darker aspects of the personality. In this way, Pi is able to associate cruel acts with the predatory nature of the tiger, while preserving the purity of his moral code. Though perhaps based on fabrication, such illusions enabled him to overcome circumstances that had the potential to destroy him. By asking the investigators which story they believe is the better story, Martel suggests that the better account is not necessarily the one that is true. In this case, only by remembering his voyage at sea with animals rather than people is Pi able to preserve his humane, God-fearing character. Furthermore, he infers that though Pi is aware that the first story is true, he still chooses to believe the second—even to the extent that he feels loss and pain at the desertion of Richard Parker.

Pi never loses his faith in God even as his beliefs are severely threatened, and as a result, a new kind of faith and conviction is birthed. Pi expresses early in the book that, “ If Christ spent an anguished night in prayer, if He burst out from the cross ‘ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ then surely we are also permitted doubt. But we must move on” (28). This very doubt is introduced in Pi’s own experience when his faith is severely

challenged by horrendous circumstances. With basic necessities available in perpetually unstable quantities, he loses the strength to practice his religious routines, while permitting the need to survive to subjugate his ethical code of compassion and love. Previously a vegetarian, he finds himself consuming meat, barbarically killing living animals, and possibly even partaking in cannibalism. The brutal, animalistic nature of Pi's survival instincts are distinctive from the morally conscientious persona previously adopted and reinforced through the practice of multiple religions. Martel thus suggests that a moral system may not be fixed and concrete, but rather adaptable to whatever circumstances are being faced. Some actions may, in fact, be justified when the individual is faced with unthinkable crises. What would have previously been deemed to be highly immoral acts are suddenly seen in a different light. Furthermore, in the face of severely dire circumstances, both mentally and physically, Pi appears to have garnered a new facet of his humanity in which he acknowledges the baser, but perhaps also equally as necessary, aspect of human nature: the selfish need to continue one's life at all costs—others' lives included. In the act of overcoming his doubts and standing firm in his religious convictions, Pi is able to transmute his faith into something that is more whole and comprehensive. He is able to accept all parts of his nature instead of just the outwardly moral, and to feel love and compassion for aspects that had once seemed horrendous and unjustifiable. Thus, Martel's concern remains less about obliging the reader to pursue belief in God, but rather about offering a non-threatening kind of solace and comfort for those who are seeking to understand all aspects of their nature.

The transformation that takes place in Pi's character is a symbol with which Martel is less concerned about any particular religious discourse, but rather one in which he uses Pi's experience of tragedy and the loss of innocence to examine the grander scope of human nature and its need for faith, hope and purpose. "And so it goes with God," Pi expresses, affirming the idea that belief and faith is far grander than the adherence to any one religion (399). During his reflection after his voyage at sea, the reader is introduced to the idea that belief in not only religion, but in any story that requires a leap of imagination, has a uniting effect on one's relationship with the world. There is a divine coalition that occurs within when one is open to the possibility inherent in a story. Religion is merely different tales and explanations of how the universe works and the purpose for human existence. Likewise, imaginative stories that tell of struggle, beauty, hope and faith equally provide understanding of our true nature. These inherent, unifying facets of our persona are what truly add value to our lives in a way that concrete facts and empirical evidence alone cannot. Martel thus suggests that the balance between faith and reason gracefully meets when there is a leap of faith into that which seems impossible to the naked eye and to the bare intellect. In the face of gruesome circumstances, Pi is forced to balance faith with reason, demonstrating the need for both to not only survive, but to thrive. Such newfound awareness is what enables him to keep his sense of morality intact. Therefore, just as faith in God provides human beings with a sense of structure, purpose and incomparable hope, the belief in stories that, at first glance, seem fanciful and untrue is what enables a person to expand beyond limited awareness and step into vast understanding.

In conclusion, Martel sheds light on the delicate relationship between intrinsic survival instincts and morality. Pi demonstrates the ability to draw strength and hope from religion and faith when in the midst of horrendous tragedy and life-threatening circumstances. He also offers hope and understanding to any reader who is grappling with all sides of his or her true nature, and what that means in regards to moral uprightness. Pi's metamorphosis from a compassionate human being into a savage survivor—as well as his ultimate restitution—demonstrate Martel's idea that morality is not a fixed concept, but rather something that is dependable upon the circumstances and the tractable ideals of the individual.