

## Spiritual Journey of Pi Patel in Life of Pi

PRATIBHA SOMKUWAR

Assistant Professor  
Dept. of English and Foreign Languages  
Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya  
Koni, Bilaspur, C.G.  
India

### Abstract:

*Life of Pi, winner of The Man Booker Prize of 2002, is written by Yann Martel. It is a spiritual journey of Pi Patel and his survival on the Pacific Ocean along with Richard Parker for 227 days. In the novel Piscine Molitor Patel love almighty God and have strong faith which long last. For one time, we start thinking that is it possible that one can love god such passionately even when he is in the midst of the havoc? Pi's Mamaji told the author (Yann Martel) while he was sitting in the Coffee house in Pondicherry that he has a story that will make him believe in god. And the novel starts with the specification that how Pi Patel came in contact with god, how he developed his sense to recognize that power, how he face the difficulty in the family and in the society because of his name and pantheistic beliefs. Life of Pi, came in midst of the time when no one believe that such type of novel would ever be written. A globalized world found it hard to believe and still it caught the attention of millions of people across the world. It is an interesting story letting us incline towards the mysticism, questioning our fundamental beliefs, and left us questioning over the mysteries of novel like the battle between the self and evil, good verses bad and human verses animal while giving us beautiful moral quotations. This paper is mostly focused on the first part of the novel where Pi's spiritual upbringing is given, which made him to survive in the second part of the novel.*

**Key words:** believe, mystery, religion, spiritual, god-power

Yann Martel came to India in search of a good story and spends almost one year visiting temples, churches, and mosques. He got a story which was not easy to believe on. A work like *Life of Pi* needs a lot of effort to get shaped. From Yann Martel's biography we come to know that it was a time of struggle in his life when he was in India. He got the story unexpectedly while he was sitting in an Indian Coffee House, on Nehru Street in Pondicherry while chatting with the local citizen of the town. The person who was sitting next to him said, "*I have a story that will make you believe in God*" (p. x, *LOP*). He gave the brief idea about the past of Pondicherry Botanical Garden, that there was a zoo, once upon a time. Author took the information, left India to search for the right Patel from the nine columns of Patels in the phonebook while in Toronto. Author called Mr. Patel hesitatingly but he got the right Patel when he asked him about his uncle's narrated evidence. They met and Mr. Patel supported the author with all the necessary information needed for his satisfaction or I can say in the journey to overcome the disbelief.

The novel is having three parts and Part I is all about Pi Patel's childhood and his spiritual uplift as a devoted Hindu, Christian and Muslim. On the basis of this spiritual development Pi was able to survive on the Pacific Ocean along with his companion Richard Parker. The novel begins with the first person narrative with the opening line '*My suffering left me sad and gloomy,*' (p. 3, *LOP*) and Pi Patel tells us the story how he was disappointed in his afterlife. His academic development and mindful practice of religion gave him confidence to survive peacefully. He chooses religious study and zoology, the subjects of his interest for further study and submitted thesis on the topic functional analysis of the thyroid gland of three-toed sloth. He further said that, "*I choose the sloth because its demeanour-calm, quiet and introspective- did something to sooth my shattered self.*" (p. 3, *LOP*) He explains that sloth is the slowest animal on the earth but Pi found sloth's presence like an upside-down yogi deep in meditation or

hermit deep in prayer. Pi sensed her smile; he found sloth a beautiful example of miracle of life leaning him to remember the almighty. Some critics said that sloth is representing the time which Pi spent on the sea, the slow moving time.

The novel moves to third chapter where Pi tells us about his uncle Francis Adirubasamy (Mamaji), who was champion competitive swimmer, the champion of all South India and through Ravi, elder brother of Pi we come to know that he was at the time of his birth was swung by the doctors with his legs, because of this his chest become thick and legs became skinny. Pi was Mamaji's truthful disciple, the most important person in the novel who taught Pi to swim which he cannot do with the other members of Pi's family and the unusual name Piscine Molitor, was given by the Mamaji to Pi after the famous swimming pool in Paris, a pool where god would be delighted to swim. In the chapter fourth Pi tells us about the huge zoo his father established in the Pondicherry, to explore which a train was needed.

In chapter fourth we get the description of zoo and the comparison of animals and religion. Pi's father, who earlier was an owner of a large hotel in Madras, has an abiding interest in animals which led him to zoo business where he was the head of fifty three staff members. Here Pi used to live as a Prince with a vast ground to play. We see him defending the zoo and animals. He says, "*I have heard nearly as much nonsense about zoos as I have about God and religion.*" (p. 15. LOP). In the whole chapter Pi is giving the information how a zoo is important for the animals as a house for the human beings. In the concluding part of the chapter he said that, "*I know zoos are no longer in people's graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both.*" (p. 19. LOP). As a reader we come to know that the spirituality was in Pi's blood. The love for animals Pi got from his father while the love for religion and apparently for God was from his mother. This might be the reason that Pi could see every minor or major thing of life in comparison with religion, apparently God and

animals. This chapter is decorated with the fondest memories of his childhood days. But it is equally interesting that Pi never told us the name of his mother though she was everywhere and missed desperately by Pi throughout the novel.

The next chapter tells us about the troubles Pi has gone through because of his name Piscine Molitor. The boys from the school used to call him Pissing and much more which made Pi's innocent heart to think, "The sound would disappear, but the hurt would linger, like the smell of piss long after it has evaporated." (p. 20. LOP). Chapter sixth is the authors visit to Pi Patel's home in Canada. But chapter seventh is important as it is giving us information how Pi was blessed with the good teachers. Pi tells us about his biology teacher, Satish Kumar, a communist. Pi said, "*Mr. Kumar is the first avowed atheist I ever met.*" (p. 25. LOP) but Pi came to know about this in the zoo and not in the classroom. Mr. Kumar used to come at zoo and one day he met Pi and started talking about politics which Pi was not aware of, so just to say something he said about the subject he was always interested in and that was religion. So he said, "*Religion will save us*" (p. 27. LOP). On which Mr. Kumar said that religion is darkness, and goes on explaining how Religion and God were not their when he was in need of. Mr. Kumar told Pi the incident when he was of Pi's age and was living in bed, racked with Polio, praying God who never came to rescue him from his agonies but, science came in the form of medicine and he was saved. This example left a deep impact on the adolescence mind of the Pi. What Pi thought after that is truly spiritual, because it is showing us his faith, which he wanted to stick with. Pi said-

"It was my first clue that atheists are my brothers and sisters of different faith, and every word they speak speaks of faith. Like me, they go as far as legs of reason carry them—and then they leap." (p. 28, LOP)

After that incident we can see that Pi was firm in his faith, on his belief that he just wanted to be in the side of that unknown

power. In chapter eighth there is detail introduction about the zoo animals given by father Santosh Patel to his sons Ravi and Pi along with their mother. They were brought to a Bengal tiger Mahisha's cage to witness how brutal the animal could be, if they are hungry. This was the lesson which Pi never forgets for his lifetime, and will be helpful in second part of the novel. In chapter thirteen Pi talks about territory, a psychological space and animals of which he has to take care of while dealing with Richard Parker on a life-boat in future. This is the proof that Pi is learning tidbits of animals and their peculiar qualities.

It is from chapter seventeen we come to know about Pi's religious following. Pi's keenness towards religion leads him to meet Jesus Christ on a holiday when they went to Munnar, in Kerala. What he observed there was astonishing to a fourteen years brain. There were the three hills in Munnar and each stood with a Godhouse on it. As a student from Christian school he had, a curiosity about Church from time immemorial which made Pi to visit the Church, met Father Martin who treated him well, like a grown-up. Father Martin mould Pi's thoughts towards Christianity along with the Hinduism. Hinduism, which is having, according to Pi the stories of every type, which Christianity was lacking. Christians believe in one God, they follow the path shown by God's son Jesus Christ who sacrificed himself for the love towards common people, who came on earth to give the message of love. Pi at that time was thinking that, *"Their religion had one story, and to it they came back again and again, over and over. It was story enough for them."*(p. 53. LOP) which were quiet amazing for Pi who until now was aware that a religion must have many Gods and all must have the super-power with them. These all Gods were born and never died which was the proof of their being God. But, Pi come to know that the God is different in different religions and so Pi accepted the God in Christian form after too much cross questioning and contemplation. The way he accepted it was interesting too, he said, *"Christianity is a religion in rush. Look at the world created in seven days."* (p. 57. LOP). In short, he

felt he was Christian by following Christ, he learned from Christianity that true love can conquer all but his spiritual lesson was not finished yet.

Islam followed right behind the Christianity hardly after one year when he was only fifteen years in age and was exploring the hometown Pondicherry when he was in Muslim quarters near to his zoo. Pi's coming in contact with Muslim Religion is given in chapter number eighteen, nineteen and twenty. He came near Jamia Masjid but stopped outside and thought-

“The Great Mosque, being careful to stay on the outside, of course. Islam had the reputation worse than Christianity's fewer Gods, greater violence, and had never heard anyone say good things about Muslim schools—so I wasn't about to step in, empty though the place was.” (p. 58. LOP)

Though, Pi thought so he did not stopped roaming around and came near a baker's shop which was run by Sufi, a Muslim mystic, who prayed his Namaz before Pi on a rolled-up carpet. His praying style left him questioning –

“Why Islam is nothing but an easy sort of exercise, I thought. Hot-weather Yoga for the Bedouins. Asanas without sweat, heaven without strain.” (p. 60. LOP)

It was something which Pi found interesting so he went to see him again and asked what his religion is about and the Sufi Mystic told him that it is about Beloved, a religion about brotherhood and devotion. After that day Pi went to the mosque and listen to Imam until the time came to pray. Pi felt immense pleasure to bring his forehead to the ground as it was a deeply religious contact with the universe he experienced. Muslim religion brought a tremendous change in Pi's perspective. We can see it in the following line from text –

“Every element lived in harmonious relation with its neighbor, 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 met Allah.” (p. 62, LOP)

One can clearly see that from here onward Pi becomes an enlightened being. Wherever, he goes he could see things differently. He became one with the omnipotent. The realization that God is not bound in one religion brought a tremendous change in Pi. Hinduism confined Pi's thinking which Christianity opened and told him that love conquers all and Muslimism told him that human beings are beloved of God so they all are equal. These three religions played a very important part in Pi's spiritual uplift and made him to proceed in his life no matter how harsh the realities were. But his pantheistic beliefs soon came to a quarrel between three important people of his life in chapter twenty-three where a Priest, a Pandit, and an Imam came to argue that Pi must follow one religion and not all religions at a time. But Pi smartly and coherently said, "*Bapu Gandhi said, 'All religions are true.' I just want to love God.*" (p. 69, LOP). And after that Pi's father who according to Pi was the part of the New India-rich, modern and secular as ice cream, who has no religious bone in his body said in half-voice, "*I suppose that's what we're all trying to do – love God.*" (p. 69, LOP)

Pantheism was not letting Pi live happily as we can see in chapter twenty-five. Pi started strongly believing that one should kill the evil inside once heart. He said, "*The main battlefield for the good is not the open ground of the public arena but the small clearing of each heart.*" (p. 71, LOP). Pi by now started to face the real obstacles coming between him and God. An oaf chased Pi away from the mosque and in the Church priest was gazing at him so that he could not feel the peace of the Christ in his heart. Dejected and rejected Pi went to the temple but here too a Brahmin shooed him away so he try to go inside when it is crowded saying that, "*Religion is about dignity, not our depravity.*" (p. 71, LOP)

It is in chapter twenty-seven, Pi shown determined to take a baptism and buy a prayer rug so that his life would cope more easily with both the religions. Pi talked with his parents about this and they were amazed. They discussed the matter

that their son is taking all these matters by heart. His father said sadly that, *“Why can't he have the normal interests of a boy of his age? Look at Ravi. All he can think about is cricket, movies and music.”* (p. 76. LOP). Indeed it is an interesting question asked by Mr. Subhash. Pi's earlier activities were out of curiosity but increased so vastly that it is hard to keep him away from all these things. When the boys of his age were thinking about love and such other things Pi was occupied with religion(s) and prayer(s). In chapter twenty-eight, Pi took the baptism and his father bought him a prayer rug which he loved dearly and lament for the loss of that beautiful prayer rug when he was telling the story to Yann Martel. Now we come to chapter twenty-nine where Pi is talking about Emergency and Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Though he was taking detached stand from the politics he was worried about his father's depression regarding the zoo and the politics. He was aware that sooner or later his family must to shift along with all the animals to Canada. We come to chapter thirty-five where Pi is talking about the day when they left the Indian shore from Madras on June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1977, on the Panamanian-registered Japanese cargo ship named Tsimtsum. The ship have officers from Japan, crew from Taiwan and passengers from India of which no one has the slightest premonition that what is going to happen with them.

Second part of the novel started with sinking of the large Tsimtsum and Pi observing it from a lifeboat while his companions were a zebra with a broken leg, a hyena, and a 450 pounds yellow Bengal cat (tiger). However, the information about its sinking shared in second chapter of the second part, it is not clearly stated that why the ship sank. Orange-juice, a female orangutan came to the lifeboat on floating bananas. Soon the ugly hyena started his killing business and his first target was zebra. He killed the zebra and turned to orange-juice who with all her strength tries to defeat the attack but she cannot survive before a strong cruel male hyena. Pi realizes that next attack will be on him but before that Richard Parker kills the hyena and Pi is saved for time being. The story of



survival of fittest on the Pacific Ocean start from here as Pi and Richard Parker were all alone on the lifeboat.

It was Pi's turn now to show depravity or to surrender before the wish of a tiger. He chooses to be galvanized and behave humanistic way. He prepare a raft strategically and try to isolate Richard Parker but Pi soon understood the folly of his decision because he was dealing with the Bengal tiger who can survive with saline water and can swim and if hungry he may soon catch the prey just few meters away from him. So, Pi dropped the idea and started working on other plan which includes keeping Richard Parker alive. But soon Pi realizes that the tiger can be trained and humanized, so he started working on it. Richard Parker for Pi was now a distraction, a reason to forget his parents and his dazzling brother Ravi. He started to understand the language of Richard Parker and come to conclusion that-

“Tigers, indeed all animals, do not favour violence as a mean of settling scores. When animals fight, it is with the intent to kill and with the understanding that they may kill.” (p. 206, LOP)

In chapter seventy-four, we come to know that it is the spiritual believe and desire to meet with the God kept Pi alive along with the Richard Parker. We see him practicing the religious rituals on the sea with all dignity and pride. But still we feel that Pi somehow, is wearied of all this. We can assume it from this line were he said, *“Faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love—but sometimes it is so hard to love.”* (p. 208. LOP). At the same time Pi's faith in God wins and made him say that he would love God. His journey with faith continue and a time came when their lifeboat came to a floating island which was a miracle for ordinary listener as there was no proof of such island ever existed in any part of the Ocean. Truly, it was all about the belief. Pi believes in living so he defeated the death and continued the journey. After the incident of the floating island Pi's lifeboat touches the Mexican

land. And Richard Parker the companion of Pi Patel left him unceremoniously after surviving together for 227 days on the Pacific Ocean.

The third part of the novel comes with the two stories which he told before the Japanese officers. Both stories have the truth in it but for normal human beings truth was too hard to digest. So, second story though not true was stamped convincing by them. *Life of Pi* is about believes in power of almighty because for Pi he was not alone on the lifeboat, he was with his faith to support him every time. With that faith Pi overcome the fear and killed the evil residing inside him. All it seems to the reader a reality turned into fantasy fiction.

While summing up, I just wanted to say that *Life of Pi* is having a strong protagonist with broad perspective in the form of Piscine Molitor Patel. If we see his journey from childhood to maturity we can see that he has devotedly changed himself but not at the cost of his faith. Pi's story is about God in the abstract form, it is not about theism or atheism only. If we search the reason for his pantheistic beliefs we come to know that he dared to reason himself and try on every level to match his spirit with the almighty. It is also very interesting that Yann Martel never believed in God but he never rejected the idea that he loved the god in the abstract form. If we see the story with Pi's perspective it was literary not possible for him to hate his neighbour and survive for 227 days. It was the belief, his spiritual will power which made him to love, and to be loved. It made him to think of Richard Parker as a beloved, the ramification of what Pi learned on the land he applied on the sea to survive. This might be the reason of Pi's missing Richard Parker and complaining throughout his life that Richard Parker left unceremoniously without saying goodbye; after all it is a sense of the human world and not the animal world, an inevitable truth.

**WORKS CITED:**

- Bandit Brainwaves. *Life of Pi-Analysis*. Part-1. [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). Downloaded on Thursday, March 19, 2015. 1:45:41 PM
- Martel, Yann, *Life of Pi*. London: Knopf Canada. 2001. Print.
- Martel, Yann. *Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia*. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yann\\_Martel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yann_Martel). Online.
- Life of Pi. *Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia*. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life\\_of\\_Pi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_of_Pi). Online.
- Nayar, P. K. *Postcolonial Literature*. Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd. (2008). Print
- The Guardian. *May Richard Parker Be Always at Your Side*. (UK). November 2002. Online.