

Life of Pi: A Challenging Postmodernist Adventure

Magda Haroun (*)

Abstract

Yan Martel's novel, *Life of Pi*, was published in 2001 and instantly became a smashing hit. The novel records the marvelous journey of Pi Patel, an Indian teenager who is stranded in the middle of the ocean with a hyena, a zebra, an orang-utan and a Bengali tiger by the name of Richard Parker. In his creation of such an incredible story, Martel resorts to a complicated meta-fictional frame narrative that induces his readers to suspend their disbelief, in order to savour the mind's magical ability to deal with the most odd circumstances. This paper seeks to explore how Martel's *Life of Pi* transcends the conventional castaway story, as it urges the reader to re-vision human-animal relations away from the dominant anthropomorphic perspective. The novel highlights the power of story telling to create a sense of the magical that challenges any conclusive perspective. Through its use of magical realism, *Life of Pi* becomes more than just an adventure story, since it addresses some of the most complex and meaningful issues. Through his inversion of the traditional animal-human relationships, Martel's *Life of Pi* has ingeniously refuted the binary divisions between animal and human, civilization and wildness, rational and mysterious. The reader shares a partnership with the postmodernist writer in trying to figure out the meaning of the text; magic realism invites the reader to be creative like the author, and to think about issues on different planes.

* Associate Professor in English Department – Faculty of Arts – Ain Shams University

حياة باى : مغامرة تحدى ما بعد حداثية

ماجدة أحمد هارون

ملخص

لقد تم نشر رواية "حياة باى" فى 2001 ونالت نجاحا كبيرا . وتسجل الرواية الرحلة المثيرة لبأى باتل ، الشاب الهندى الذى غرقت سفينته فى المحيط وفقد جميع افراد عائلته وبقى وحيدا مع نمرفي قارب نجاة. استطاع الكاتب بان مارتل ان يجسد الاحداث للقاريء من خلال رؤية ما بعد حداثية واسلوب سلس خلق تفاعل بين عقل القاريء و الاحداث الغريبة فى الرواية. وتسعي ورقة البحث لاستكشاف كيف يمكن للرواية أن تتعدى الشكل التقليدى لرواية المفقود فى البحر من خلال مراجعة الفكرة التقليدية للعلاقة بين الانسان والحيوان، بعيدا عن فكرة الانسنة، ومن خلال استخدام اسلوب الواقعية السحرية تمكن الكاتب من تقديم شكل جديد لرواية البحر، متناولا قضايا معقدة وعميقة . من خلال التعامل غير التقليدى للعلاقة بين الانسان والحيوانات تدعو الرواية لتقبل فكرة الاختلاف و رفض منطق انا او الاخر، و اسلوب الواقعية السحرية الذى اتبعه الكاتب يحض على اعمال الفكر واستيعاب فكرة الاختلاف.

Life of Pi: A Challenging Postmodernist Adventure

Yan Martel's novel, *Life of Pi*, was published in 2001 and instantly became a smashing hit. Martel, a Canadian novelist and a short story writer, became a best-selling author, as the book won Britain's prestigious Man Booker Prize for fiction a year later. In his critical review of the prize winning novel, James Wood comments: "*Life of Pi* is proud to be a delegate for magic realism.. In a proper paradox, this magical story is made plausible, and vivid and dramatic, only by the careful application of conventional realist techniques" (*London Review of Books*, 2002). Moreover, in 2012, *Life of Pi* was also successfully adapted for the silver screen, winning great critical acclaim (French, *The Observer*, 2012). The novel records the marvellous journey of Pi Patel, an Indian teenager who is stranded in the middle of the ocean with a hyena, a zebra, an orang-utan and a Bengali tiger by the name of Richard Parker. In his creation of such an incredible story, Martel resorts to a complicated meta-fictional frame narrative that induces his readers to suspend their disbelief, in order to savour the mind's magical ability to deal with the most odd circumstances.

Like an old yarn spinner, Yan Martel spins his yarn – a long story account of an adventure of incredible happenings, or fantastic events – where he explores the intricate relations between humans and beasts, as they are both engulfed by the uncanny oceanic surrounding. This third novel of Martel follows the track of a long tradition of remarkable literary texts like *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moby Dick* and 'The Ancient Mariner', of heroes surviving an ordeal at sea, of the shipwrecked castaway. However, this paper seeks to explore how Martel's *Life of Pi* transcends the conventional castaway story as it urges readers to re-vision human-animal relations away from the dominant anthropomorphic perspective, offering "a radical decentring of human-centred storytelling" (Stephens, 49).

Life of Pi reveals the complex nature of human bestial relations, using magical incarnations as a supporting supplement to the dreariness and life threatening existence of Pi in his ordeal. The hero experiences a 'Darwinian' struggle for survival, as he is not only stranded at sea without enough resources, but also undergoes the

daunting trial of coexisting with a predator. Brenda Marshall underscores the intricate blending of the magical and the real: “*Life of Pi*’s narrative structure falls into magic realism which blurs the boundaries between what is ‘magic’ and what is ‘real’. In *Life of Pi* the blurring takes the form of a lack of distinction between the animals on the boat and the characters they represent between the animal world and the human world – between imagination and reality” (179).

The novel highlights the power of storytelling to create a sense of the magical that challenges any conclusive perspective. Through its use of magic realism, *Life of Pi* becomes more than just an adventure story, since it addresses some of the most complex and meaningful issues. When *Tsimtsum* sinks with his entire family on board, Pi finds himself in a life or death confrontation with powers of nature. As he says:

To be a castaway is to be caught in a harrowing ballet of circles. You are at the centre of one circle, while above you two opposing circles spin about. The sun distresses you like a crowd, a noisy, invasive crowd that makes you cup your ears, that makes you close your eyes, that makes you want to hide. The moon distresses you by silently reminding you of your solitude; you open your eyes wide to escape your loneliness. When you look up, you sometimes wonder if at the centre of a solar storm, in the middle of the Sea of Tranquillity, there isn’t another one like you also looking up, also trapped by geometry, also struggling with fear, rage, madness, hopelessness, apathy. (239)

A sixteen-year-old castaway, Pi is stuck on a lifeboat with Richard Parker, a ferocious tiger in the middle of the great ocean. “Every single thing I value in life has been destroyed. And I am allowed no explanation? I am to suffer hell without any account from heaven? In that case, what is the purpose of reason, Richard Parker?” (108) With these words he addresses the tiger, and from hence on a human-animal bond is established between them. He expresses his appreciation for Richard Parker’s presence through his fight-for-survival ordeal: “It is the irony of this story that the one who scared

me witless to start with was the very same who brought me peace, purpose, I dare say even wholeness” (179). What Pi experiences, fulfils one of the major components of a magical text, which according to Faris and Zamora, “contains an irreducible element of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them” (167).

According to Hutcheon, the position of the postmodern author is one of “discursive authority” (151). In the meta-fiction of postmodernism, the author acknowledges to the reader his or her presence, admitting his complicity in deciding meaning from the text. The frame narrator constantly interjects Pi’s narration. The narratological disruption engages the reader’s interest to figure out issues left unresolved. By conflating fact and fiction, *Life of Pi* challenges and engages the reader. Marshall maintains that, “the postmodern meta-fictionist challenges the reader to recognize that together they determine meaning” (151). The reader is enjoined to dive into the text for meaning, as well as visualize what is presented.

In his article, “Scheheazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction,” Wendy Faris and Lois Zamora underline certain features that they believe characterizes the magical realist narrative as a postmodernist projection, and of which this paper will avail itself in its discussion of *Life of Pi*. As Faris and Zamora maintain, the hesitation “between contradictory understandings of events – and hence experiencing some unsettling doubts” (171), constitutes a major feature of a magical realist vision. The narrative “achieves a kind of de-familiarization that appears to be natural or artless” (177). Richard Parker portrayed as an almost-human personality, the carnivorous island (which at first seems to be a paradise), and also the blind castaway in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, all present elements of magic that cannot be explained realistically. The concept of different versions of truth results from mixing the actual with the fictive.

As a magical realistic narrative, *Life of Pi* displays “a strong sense of the phenomenal world” (Faris and Zamora, 169). The narrator’s minute delineation of sensory details involves, “entrancing magic details that cannot be explained according to the laws of the

natural universe” (Faris and Zamora, 171). In his battle for survival, Pi comes to realize the futility of overcoming his ferocious enemy and the need to establish an ingenious way of coexistence, as a strategic option: “I had to tame him. It was at that moment that I realized necessity. It was not a question of him or me, but of him and me. We were, literally and figuratively, in the same boat. We would live – or we would die – together” (181). Pi has never forgotten that the Bengal tiger is a dangerous enemy. He has acquired his knowledge about the ferocious nature of animals since his early childhood: “I quite deliberately dressed wild animals in tame costumes of my imagination. But I never deluded myself as to the real nature of my playmates” (37). Pi has no option but to devise a plan to preserve separate grounds where he and Richard Parker will each stick to his own territory, and not encroach upon the other. Stephens remarks on Pi’s need to redefine the idea of master and mastery:

Mastering the arts of survival includes the imperative, for Pi, of learning to master his emotions. And he masters his fear by learning to serve an animal master. This process – the achieving of animal-human equilibrium, and a science-religion balance – is achieved through an attention to detail that has both scientific and religious components. His prayer practice clearly plays a role in helping Pi achieve a sort of Zen-like attention to being in the moment that enables him to go on with the science-informed rituals (cleaning, fishing, etc.) that are necessary for survival. (49)

The symbolism of *Life of Pi* invokes insights and fresh ideas that challenge the traditional expectations of readers. Ironically, Richard Parker, who is Pi’s unremitting menace, is also a source of strength, perseverance and inspiration:

A part of me was glad about Richard Parker. A part of me did not want Richard Parker to die at all, because if he died I would be left alone with despair, a foe even more formidable than a tiger. If I still had the will to live, it was thanks to Richard Parker. He kept me from thinking too much about my family and my tragic circumstances. He pushed me to go on living. I hated him for it, yet at the

same time I was grateful. I *am* grateful. It's the plain truth: without Richard Parker, I wouldn't be alive today to tell you my story. (182)

The tiger's presence triggers in Pi the will to live, and instigates him to develop a practical survival strategy based on coexistence. Pi's sense of companionship with the tiger, according to June Dwyer, "contributes strongly to Pi's mental health... Pi's behaviour, in contrast to the tiger's, is a highly emotional expression of affection and a promise to save Richard Parker as Richard Parker saved him" (17). This does not entail any illusions of harmony, for Martel offers his readers a realistic and violent depiction of the way the animals on the boat are killed one by one: "A massive paw landed on its shoulders. Richard Parker's jaws closed on the side of the hyena's neck. Its glazed eyes widened. There was a noise of organic crunching as windpipe and spinal cord were crushed. The hyena shook. Its eyes went dull. It was over" (167). Stephens notes the challenge the narrative represents to the expectations of readers about believability:

Neither the story of Noah and the ark, nor Pi on the lifeboat with a tiger, can be considered objectively true, in all of their details. But both are metaphors that make comprehensible the passes-all-understanding phenomenon of human survival in extreme circumstances. Or as the Japanese investigators finally acknowledge in the summary report with which the novel concludes, Pi's is "an outstanding story of courage and endurance in the face of extraordinary difficult and tragic circumstances" (354)... they give up the quixotic quest for objectivity or believability, and adapt a literary framework, acknowledging that Pi's "story is unparalleled in the history of shipwrecks" (354), just as one might say that Noah's story is unparalleled in the history of floods. (51)

Despite its absurdity, the descriptive details of the animals' behaviour on the boat and how they attack and eat each other, invites the reader to concede to the plausibility of what is depicted. As the improbability of the events increases, a magical aura is created. A flow of fantastical imagery holds the reader spellbound by Pi's

enchanting world, ready to concede to the truth of what he avers. The algae island, inhabited by meerkats, represents another incredible incident in the novel that defies our incredulity and even Pi's himself:

I was getting used to the mental delusion. To make it last I refrained from putting a strain on it; when the lifeboat nudged the island, I didn't move, only continued to dream. The fabric of the island seemed to be an intricate, tightly webbed mass of tubes-shaped seaweed, in diameter a little thicker than two fingers. What a fanciful island, I thought. (285)

Questioning the narrator's account is the knot that the reader has to ponder over on how to untie. The hero's name itself, Pi – short for his birth name, Piscine – is an elusive number that signifies the infiniteness of human experience. Pi explains how his choice to shorten his name spared him the ridicule of his schoolmates: “In that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe, I found refuge” (27). Gregory Stephens comments on the symbolic significance of the name:

Pi is an irritating and unique number for the mathematician who, above all academics, desires certainty and factuality. It irritates because it defies the scientist's longing for certainty. At the same time it fascinates because of its “infinite randomness”. Pi, as a mathematical formula, functions both as a logical equation and as a sort of mystical symbol. The novel itself seeks to strike that same sort of “irritating but fascinating” balance of the title character's name. (50)

The use of the first person is aptly employed to blur the line between what Lucie Armitt conceives of “the narrative subject as hero and the narrative subject as storyteller” (144). Both Pi and the frame narrator are well aware of the fascination that story telling purports. Martel's narrative recounts the account of an account, which mystifies the line between his hero and the author-narrator as a storyteller. The author-narrator avers that his novel is a transcript of a story the actual Pi revealed to him while he was in India:

[Mr. Patel] showed me the diary he kept during the

Life of Pi: A Challenging Postmodernist Adventure

events. He showed me the yellowed newspaper clippings that made him briefly, obscurely famous. He told me his story. All the while I took notes. Nearly a year later, after considerable difficulties, I received a tape and a report from the Japanese Ministry of Transport. (*Pi*, x)

Throughout his daunting ordeal, Pi realizes that he needs to have faith in God to give him hope in survival. Prayers are part of his daily routine on the raft:

I would have given up – if a voice hadn't made itself heard in my heart: The voice said, "I will not die. I refuse it. I will make it through this nightmare. I will beat the odds, as great as they are. I have survived so far, miraculously. Now I will turn miracle into routine. The amazing will be seen every day. I will put in all the hard work necessary. Yes, so long as God is with me, I will not die, Amen. (164)

In his depiction of Pi, Martel has managed to challenge the concept of the mutual exclusiveness of cultures. Through his character, Martel creates a harmonious common ground between the three religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. According to Zamora and Faris, a magical realist narrative abstains from allying itself specifically to any particular doctrine despite the fact that systems of belief and local lore often underlie the text (177). The encounter between the representatives of the three religions and Pi's father, and where Pi is discovered to be a follower of the three religions represents a counterargument against Huntington's widely propagated notion of the inevitable clash of civilizations. Pi's answer to his mother's question about how he feels about choosing one religion is very simple but profound: he quotes Gandhi's famous words, "All religions are true. I just want to love God" (76).

What Pi seems to suggest is the possibility of coexistence, since the other alternative would be losing one's life. Having grown up in a zoo town, he is aware of the dangers of the natural world: "If I survived my apprenticeship as a high seas animal trainer, it was because Richard Parker did not really want to attack me. Tigers,

indeed all animals, do not favour violence as a means of setting scores. When animals fight, it is with intent to kill and with the understanding that they may be killed. A clash is costly” (229).

Pi’s duress induces spiritual insight as his faith in God and in his humanity is tested. Martel notes the tragic reversion of humans into animalism in the battle for survival, which is reminiscent of Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. The difference between human and beast becomes narrower as Pi proceeds to tame Richard Parker, and he gradually reverts to the bestial side in him. He, frantically, admits that he has “descended to a level of savagery [he has never] imagined possible” (218), “driven by the extremity of [his] need and madness to which it pushed me” (284).

The fact that Pi has grown up in zoo town, has made him familiar with the wonders and dangers of the natural world. Zoology gives him the confidence to handle the wild animals on his boat. Through Pi’s story, Martel presents what could be considered a challenge to Samuel Huntington’s theory of the inevitable clash of civilizations, maintaining that “even more than ethnicity, religion discriminates sharply and exclusively among people” (27). While Huntington refers to religion as the central player in the dynamics of wars between nations, Martel seems to propose a rather different perspective. In his wanton state, Pi resorts to prayer as a kind of reassuring support against the threatening ocean. Learning to coexist on the small lifeboat with the fiercest of animals, turns out to be the wisest and most strategic option for survival. Manoeuvring to establish a viable coexistence, Pi draws a strategy:

What was missing here to tame Richard Parker? Time? It might be weeks before a ship sighted me. I had all the time in the world. Resolve? There’s nothing like extreme need to give you resolve. Knowledge? Was I not a zookeeper’s son? Reward? Was there any reward greater than life? Any punishment worse than death? I looked at Richard Parker. My panic was gone. My fear was dominated. Survival was at hand. (182)

Pi engages in a Darwinian struggle for survival while stranded in the ocean, regarded by Foucault as a significant setting, “where the

Life of Pi: A Challenging Postmodernist Adventure

decisive events, the moments of eternal choice, of temptation, fall and redemption occur” (115). Reason and belief in God constitute Pi’s means of survival. Dwyer points out that,

Life of Pi rewrites other shipwreck narratives involving animals by unsettling anthropomorphic and anthropocentric norms of friendship and dominance. It presents instead a Darwinian, or more broadly speaking, an ecological story line, which means that the human protagonist has emotional, moral and intellectual interest in the animal question. (15)

Pi’s success in overcoming his ordeal glorifies the mind’s resilience and the refusal to be crippled by fear.

Pi’s house in Canada resembles a temple for the three religions: Islam, Christianity and Hinduism. His recognition of the three religions underscores an advocacy of multiculturalism and a reconsideration of the tendency of formal religions to regard their creeds as mutually exclusive. Pi’s words have a tremendous impact on the narrator of his story:

An alignment of the universe along moral lines, not intellectual ones; a realization that the founding principle of existence is what we call love, which works itself out sometimes not clearly, not immediately ineluctably... An intellect confounded yet a trusting sense of presence and of ultimate purpose. (70)

On reaching Mexico, Richard Parker jumps out of the boat and runs towards the jungle without looking back to bid his human companion goodbye. Amazingly, Pi is hurt and feels abandoned, “because Richard Parker had left [him] so unceremoniously. What a terrible thing it is to botch a farewell” (316). Pi’s attitude demonstrates his sense of affinity between humans and animals, despite their differentness. Moreover, his story, according to Dwyer, reflects a duality, “as his choice as an adult to pursue careers in both religious studies and zoology: His interest in these two disciplines reflects his desire to understand both human and non-human animal behaviour” (18).

According to Patrick Murphy, what magic realism and

postmodernist fiction have in common is that they both “generate a distantiating based on tweaking and contemporaneous reality, or introducing irruptive and disruptive non-realist phenomena to change the gestalt framework of character or reader orientation” (161). Pi has reconstructed reality in order to spare his listeners the possible atrocity of what might have really happened, and providing a rival version for the reader, in tune with the postmodernist defiance of closure. By offering two versions of his incredible adventure to the two Japanese investigators, Pi reveals that they “represent tradition-bound audiences who have certain expectations for shipwreck narratives and for animal behaviour, expectations that need emendation. They know shipwreck narratives, and they know beast fables, but they don’t know beasts... [they] admit that since it makes no difference to them and they ‘can’t prove the question either way,’ that the ‘better story’ is ‘the story with animals’” (352). In breaking away from the traditional representation of shipwrecked narratives, Martel has managed to subvert the conventional narrative and show, as Dwyer maintains, “the possibility of this kind of dialogue between human and animal cultures, and it suggests at the same time that both Pi and Richard Parker have gained an advantage from their externality to one another” (19).

Marshall points out that the selective presentation of reality adopted involves “a strategy of destabilization” (187), which makes Pi offer two versions of his adventure, one with animals and another without. Through his inversion of the traditional animal-human relationships, Martel’s *Life of Pi* has ingeniously refuted the binary divisions between animal and human, civilization and wildness, and rational and mysterious. The reader shares a partnership with the postmodernist writer in trying to figure out the meaning of the text; magic realism invites the reader to be as creative as the author, and to think about issues on different planes. Linda Hutcheon’s remark is a case in point, “The present and the past, the fictive and the factual: the boundaries may frequently be transgressed in postmodern fiction, but there is never any resolution of the ensuing contradictions”. (69)

Works Cited

- Armitt, Lucie. *Fantasy Fiction: An Introduction*. New York: Continuum, 2005.
- Dwyer, June. "Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* and the Evolution of The Shipwreck Narrative," *Modern Language Studies*, 35.2, 2005.
- French, Philip. "Life of Pi_ Review," *The Observer*, 23 December 2012. Web.
- Huntington, Samuel. "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72.3 (1993): 22-49. Web.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Martel, Yan. *Life of Pi*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2002.
- Marshall, Brenda K. *Teaching the Postmodern: Fiction and Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Stephens, Gregory. "Feeding Tiger, Finding God: Science, Religion, and "the Better Story" in *Life of Pi*." *Intertexts*, 14.1, 2010.
- Wood, James. "Credulity," *London Review of Books*, vol.24. no. 22. 14 November 2002. Web.
- Zamora, Lois Parkinson & Faris, Wendy B. *Magic Realism, Theory, History, Community*. London: Duke University Press, 1995.