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**Theme of Faith and Magic Realism in the Novel 'Life of Pi'****Rupal Amin Farista***Research Scholar, Iksvy Khairagarh, (Chhattisgarh), India***Abstract**

The researcher through this article on his novel, *Life of Pi*, tries to bring out Martel's philosophy of religion. It is organized around a philosophical debate about the modern world's privileging of reason over imagination, science over religion, materialism over idealism, fact over fiction or story. The article tries to elucidate the theme of magic realism and utter faith in God by narrating the story of Pi, the young boy who survives all odds in the sea for 227 days. The absolute faith helps Pi survive all odds and reach the shore alive making him much more mature and positive towards the presence of God. The slow progression of a boy, who tests all religions and finally turns out to be the greatest believer to endure the worst situation; surviving in sea with a dangerous Bengal Tiger, is interesting as well as realistic. Yann Martel has thus beautifully presented this tale of magic realism and made it parallel to the tale of faith.

**Key Words:** skepticism, doubt and faith, religion, hope, imaginative creativity, fantastic, magic realism

The definition of religion given by the atheist biology teacher of Pi in the novel was, "Religion is darkness...there are no grounds for going beyond a scientific explanation of reality and no sound reason for believing anything but our sense experience. A clear intellect, close attention to detail and a little scientific knowledge will expose religion as superstitious bosh. God does not exist." (Martel, 'Life of Pi', 27)

It was this provoking speech of his biology teacher which led to Pi becoming so staunchly religious person. It led to his determination to test each religion and reason each out according to their specialty. Martel through the symbol of Pi proves that it is doubt which leads a man to think again and reason out the truth. And that atheism is not bad but doubting our faith is. He says in

his novel, "To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation." (Martel, 28)

The author begins the novel with the author's note describing his visit to India for inspiration for writing a novel. While sipping a hot coffee in the coffeehouse of Pondicherry, he met Francis Adirubasamy who claimed that, "I have a story that will make you believe in god". The literature long back was based on romantic and mythical tales about gods and goddesses and the folk tales. The topic of earlier literature was religious scriptures: may it be bible or life of some saints or mythical figures. The purpose of literature was spreading morality and the message of God among the people. Later, the trends changed and literature was an important media of entertainment and the sort of escapism from reality. The Romantic

Age literature was based on nature and its beauties and it started talking about the common men and its needs.

With the industrial civilization and the progress of nations, the people also started getting more learned and modern. The trends in writing changed too. The touch of modern style like the stream of consciousness, the surrealism, the realism, the naturalism was added to today's literature. Now the matter of writing was sought not only from the history; but from day to day life- realism and naturalism and also from the thinking pattern of a human being. What we think and dream also started being put down to paper by surrealist writers.

Dr. Robert P. Fletcher of West Chester University has cited from M.H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms*,

The term magic realism, originally applied in the 1920s to a school of painters, is used to describe the prose fiction of Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina, as well as the work of writers such as Gabriel García Márquez in Colombia, Gunter Grass in Germany, and John Fowles in England. These writers interweave, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and descriptive details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with materials derived from myth and fairy tales. Robert Scholes has popularized metafiction as an overall term for the large and growing class of novels which depart drastically from the traditional categories either of realism or romance, and also the term fabulation for the current mode of free-wheeling narrative invention. These

novels violate, in various ways, standard novelistic expectations by drastic -- and sometimes highly effective -- experiments with subject matter, form, style, temporal sequence, and fusions of the everyday, the fantastic, the mythical, and the nightmarish, in renderings that blur traditional distinctions between what is serious or trivial, horrible or ludicrous, tragic or comic.

The story in the novel 'The Life of Pi, is of a young man of the title, Piscine (Pi) Molitor Patel who tells about how he survived for 227 days after the Japanese ship carrying him and his family from India to Canada, along with a collection of zoo animals, sank in the Pacific. He found himself sharing a lifeboat with a hyena, a zebra with a broken leg, an orangutan, and an adult male Bengal tiger. However, when he is confronted with the skepticism of one of the officials from the Japanese Ministry of Transport investigating the ship's sinking, Pi provides an alternative version of his tale of survival, a version that replaces animals with people. Pi then puts a question to the investigators: "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?" When both officials choose the story with animals, Pi replies, "Thank you. And so it goes with God" (352).

Peter Whittaker succinctly puts it: "This wonderful book did not make me believe in God but it did reinforce my faith in the considerable redemptive powers of fiction" (33). Martel is a post-modernist and in this novel he has dealt with the issue of God in a

modern perspective. Narrating the story of shipwreck-Pi Patel is as true as the theory of existence of God. Pi tells us, "Agnostics lack imagination and miss the better story" (70) Thus Martel wants to put his point before readers that God's existence is a matter neither of fact nor of faith, but rather is a better story than the one told by those who doubt or deny God's existence.

In chapter 15 of the novel, Martel describes the house of Pi. He writes:

His house is a temple. In the entrance hall hangs a framed picture of Ganesha, he of the elephant head...he is the lord overcomer of obstacles, the god of good luck, the god of wisdom, the patron of learning...in the living room...there is a framed picture of the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe...next to it is a framed photo of the black-robed Kaaba, holiest sanctum of Islam, surrounded by a ten-thousand fold swirl of the faithful. On the television set is a brass statue of Shiva as Natraja, the cosmic lord of the dance...there is a shrine in the kitchen...upstairs in his office there is a brass Ganesha...a wooden Christ on the Cross from Brazil on a wall and a green prayer rug in a corner.

Pi mouths Martel's philosophy as, "the paths to liberation are numerous, but the bank along the way is always the same, the Bank of Karma, where the liberation account of each of us is credited or debited depending on our actions." (49) Putting his view point in a comic way he says further, "Hindus, in their capacity for love are indeed hairless Christians, just as Muslims, in the way they see God in everything, are bearded Hindus, and Christians, in their devotion to God, are hat-wearing Muslims." (49-50) Martel

wonders at the authorities of religion who want to divide human beings in the name of religion. They would not allow a human being to be simply human but they argue as the pandit argues with Pi's father, "But he can't be a Hindu, a Christian *and* a Muslim. It's impossible. He must choose." (69) But Piscine remains firm on his belief arguing, "Bapu Gandhi said, all religions are true...I just want to love God." (69) Martel brings out his philosophy of religion through this novel and at places he pens down his own philosophy writing, "These people fail to realize that it is on the inside that God must be defended, not on the outside...the main battlefield of good is not the open ground of the public arena but the small clearing of each heart." (71)

Pi is not allowed to ride the boats of religion at a time, he is sometimes chased away from the mosque and sometimes the church priest glares at him through the service and a Brahmin shooed him away from *darshan* and his religious doings were reported to his parents as if treason was reported. But Martel reveals that for Pi, "religion is about our dignity, not our depravity." (71) When Pi was stranded in the Pacific Ocean with meager means of survival and a host of dangers ready to plunge on him; his hope in God and hope that there is a higher power above who will save him remained in his heart. He did not forget to pray everyday even in that worse scenario. His belief,

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, as long as god is with me, I will not die. Amen. (148)

The environment in *Pi* was put had all chances of bringing him to doubt his condition, his life, his faith, yet he remained hopeful. Explaining his thinking about what doubt could do, Martel writes: "Doubt meets disbelief and disbelief tries to push it out. But disbelief is a poorly armed foot soldier. Doubt does away with it with little trouble. You become anxious. Reason, comes to do battle for you." (161)

It was the belief of *Pi*, the eternal hope in him which kept him alive in all the adverse conditions he faced at sea. *Pi* narrates the tale of how he practiced his religion at sea too. He says:

I practiced religious rituals that I adapted to the circumstances- solitary Masses without priests or consecrated Communion host, *darshans* without murtis, and pujas with turtle meat for Prasad, acts of devotion to Allah not knowing where Mecca was and getting my Arabic wrong. They brought me comfort, that is certain. But it was hard, oh, it was hard. Faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love-but sometimes it was so hard to love. (208)

*Life of Pi* is organized around a philosophical debate about the modern world's privileging of reason over imagination, science over religion, materialism over idealism, fact over fiction or story. The extreme poles of this debate are represented in the latter part of the novel by the two officials from the Japanese government. Mr. Okamoto, the head of the investigation, exemplifies the positivist view

of truth as an objective reality that can be uncovered and verified by the methods of science. Because, for him, the sole criterion of human knowledge is empirical evidence, he dismisses *Pi*'s first story, the story with animals, as "incredible" (328) and "very unlikely" (332): "We [sic] just don't believe there was a tiger living in your lifeboat" (330). His assistant Mr. Chiba, on the other hand, represents the viewpoint of Romanticism, and, in particular, its emphasis on spontaneity, subjectivity, imaginative creativity, and emotion. "What a story" (324)

During the interview by Mr. Okamoto, *Pi* challenges positivist claims about the objectivity of truth and rationality. Thus, for example, in responding to Mr. Okamoto's suggestion that, in sticking to the story with animals, he is being unreasonable, *Pi* repudiates: "Reason is excellent for getting food, clothing and shelter. Reason is the very best tool kit. Nothing beats reason for keeping tigers away. But be excessively reasonable and you risk throwing out the universe with the bathwater" (330-31). *Pi* tells a second version of story when Mr. Okamoto would not take the animal story as true. *Pi*'s second story, the story without animals, comprises less than ten pages of the novel. Though it lacks the bulk of the first story, it has its own depth and complexity. Dispensing with the techniques of realism, it is written in a prose of concentrated direction that makes its sparse material serve symbolic ends. Unlike the first story, it is also anti-romantic and anti-idealist in its thrust. Told from a position of disillusionment and skeptical irony, it projects a view of life that emphasizes



greed, cruelty, corruption, and futility. But Mr. Chiba finds it a horrible story.

But when he asks them as to which story they found better? In contrast to Mr. Chiba, who responds at once to Pi's question, Mr. Okamoto takes time to consider his answer (352). As Pi states, "Neither [story] explains the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*," and, as Mr. Okamoto ultimately concedes, science cannot, on the basis of the available evidence, explain it either. Nor is it possible to prove which of Pi's two stories of survival "is true and which is not" (351-52). Still, Mr. Okamoto makes a selection, choosing, like Mr. Chiba, the story with animals as "the better story." This indicates that he has undergone a transformation: a development of his imaginative capacity. His reasoning and imaginary capacity both have been deconstructed and Pi is then able to draw his analogy: "And so it goes with God."

Martel creates a tale of magic realism out of story of Pi. In literature, "magical realism"

is a type of modern literary style where the elements of the fantastic are woven into a story which is very realistic and believable. He tried to draw a resemblance between the story of Pi and the story of every human being in context with his belief of religion and god. To believe in a faith and existence of God who cannot be seen or proved is just like the magical encounter Pi describes he faced while he was stranded at sea. He alone endured the journey in the lifeboat for 227 days, there was no other witness to how he spends his these days or how he survived or with whom he survived. Whatever he narrated has to be either believed or doubted but no reason to discard the fact that he is alive and had almost met death then. The experience of encounter with God and his ways of life is also like magic realistic tales; only the person knows what he experienced and was it true or not; there is no way we can prove that there is no God or that there is one! Yann Martel has thus beautifully presented this tale of magic realism and made it parallel to the tale of faith.

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