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► **To cite this version:**

Ravinder Singh Rana. LIFE OF PI OR A SURVIVOR'S DILEMMA. RABINDRA BHARATI JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY, 2023, RABINDRA BHARATI JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY, XXIV (09), <https://rbu.ac.in/home/page/106>. hal-04074992

HAL Id: hal-04074992

<https://hal.science/hal-04074992>

Submitted on 26 May 2023

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Key Words: Boat, Displacement, Loss, Trauma, Survival, Humanity

Life of Pi or a survivor's dilemma

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Life of Pi (2001), a novel by Yann Martel focuses on the certainty of loss and the uncertainty of survival in the sea. In the middle of the Pacific Ocean the protagonist Piscine Molitor Patel loses his family and the animals that his family had reared at the zoo owned by them in Pondicherry, India. The shipwreck takes place in the course of their journey from India to Canada where they are moving to take refuge from the political volatility back home. Piscine manages to find a raft in the midst of that gigantic ocean- as his lifeboat is occupied by a ferocious Bengal tiger- and he thereby becomes one of the raft people. Bodies of animals and humans left behind in the ocean, Piscine knits a complex fractured tale of his survival resulting from the trauma of the disaster, which calls into question the notion of rationality.

In spite of the plethora of the experiences of survivors, a sense of having lived in perdition forms a common denominator in their testimonies, and even in the absence of those testimonies. This article investigates the literary dimension of a survivor account through the narratives posited in the novel in the form of an ode to those missing witness accounts. As many of these accounts have revealed, survivors have to live with a trauma, a trauma of having survived while others were perishing. Piscine- the protagonist-narrator- bears the death of his people and animals on his conscience. The notion of fictionality deep-rooted in the literary genre emerges to fill the vacuum left by the absence of a real survivor, encompassing thereby a reality that could otherwise be lost, as Primo Lévi insinuated in his witness account through an allegorical title for the Auschwitz gas chambers, *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), there cannot be a real witness account, as the real witness is dead.

I will foreground the role of a literary fiction in underlining the despair and trauma associated to the loss appearing in the form of dead bodies in the middle of nowhere that becomes a tangible geographical location, and will also emphasize on the representation of a bigger tragedy, which is also a common denominator between Lévi's death camps and Martel's deadly ocean: a survivor's predicament of mourning those personal losses and concurrently overlooking them in order to concentrate on the survival in real-time.

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Life of Pi or a survivor's dilemma

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‘When your life is threatened, your sense of empathy is blunted by a terrible, selfish hunger for survival’, says Piscine Patel, the protagonist in *Life of Pi* (2001) . The novel penned by the Canadian writer Yann Martel, obtained the Man Booker prize in 2002 and was made into a motion picture by Ang Lee ten years later with the same title . This *Odyssey of Pi*, as aptly suggests the title of the movie in French revolves around the life of Pi in South India, his journey on a ship in the Pacific Ocean and later on, a shipwreck and Pi’s survival. The French title thereby provides us with the incipit of the book as opposed to a somewhat generic connotation carried on by the English one.

The French title takes a leaf out of Homer’s classic and does justice to the book as the diegetic time in the novel is full of adventures for Pi. The English title that had ‘Life of...’ instead of the ‘Odyssey of...’ insinuates that the whole life of a survivor- and not just the time when he was grappling to survive- is an odyssey, as he would perhaps never cease to live those moments of near death experiences that equally translated into the survivor abandoning momentarily his humanity and adopting the animal instinct of a survivor.

The plot revolves around Pi, his father, mother, and a brother, who run a zoo in Pondicherry, South India, and they are required to flee the country due to the politics of Indira Gandhi and the imposition of the Emergency rule in the 70s for a period of two years. So a novel published in 2002 has the diegetic time of the late 70s, carrying an intertextual wink with another Indo-Canadian author, Rohinton Mistry’s novel, *Such a long journey* published in 1991, where Gandhi’s rule slowly tilts a nation suffering with birth pangs to dictatorship. Pi’s father decides to leave India and settle down in Canada, and to take his Zoo animals along with him. Even though the pretext of fleeing India does not hold water- what follows is a trail of adventure that results in a ship wreck in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, in the losses of both human beings, of animals, and of innocence for the 15 years old Pi.

The sole human survivor of that shipwreck is Piscine, with a Bengal tiger of ‘420 pounds’, a Hyena, a Zebra, and an Orangutan. They all land on a lifeboat, and because of the Tiger’s presence on the lifeboat, Piscine has to move to a raft lying nearby, and attach it with the boat. A surreal situation in which a Piscine has to share his only life support, the boat, and

cross the Pacific, it puts Pi in the category of Raft people and book as an Ocean-book like a road-book.

Piscine's sea adventure ends when he lands in the Mexican territory where he narrates his account to the Japanese ship investigators who are not willing to believe his account, a stark reminder of what happened to the Holocaust survivors once they returned to their 'normal' lives after their ordeal in the death camps.

As many historical accounts have revealed, survivors have to live with a trauma, a trauma of having survived while others were perishing. Piscine- the protagonist-narrator- bears the death of his people and animals on his conscience. Literature, through imagination and artistic creativity, manages to fill the gap left by the absence of a real victim, encompassing thereby a reality that could otherwise be lost, as Primo Lévi insinuated in his *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), there cannot be a real witness account, as the real witness is dead, referring to the Auschwitz gas chambers.

Through this presentation, I will foreground the role of literary fiction in underlining the despair and trauma associated to the loss appearing in the form of dead bodies in the middle of nowhere and will also emphasize on the representation of a bigger tragedy: a survivor's predicament of mourning those personal losses and concurrently overlooking them in order to concentrate on the survival in real-time.

I- literary fiction and dead bodies

With his *Life of PI* and later on its follow up *Beatrice and Virgil*(2010) few years later, Martel underlines the role of fiction in the vast ocean of witness accounts that falls under the category of non-fiction. Another important aspect of this novel is that it captures the death in the ocean much before the real horrors started appearing in popular media and social networks that mainly reported deaths in Lampedusa in the Mediterranean Sea.

Does fiction undermines non-fiction? the writer appears to have a double aim of engaging- in literal terms- the reader with the ordeal of the survivor and the victim, and to make him deal with the fragmented account of the survivor precisely because it becomes a part of the aesthetics of memory shaped not only by what was really lived but also by the trauma that was lived during the journey.

In her *The Boat People* (2018), Sharon Bala addresses the nature of trauma of war refugees trying to prove their innocence and their non-cooperation in war, neither as soldier, nor as

militant, one of the major criteria to make them eligible for demanding a refugee status. In *Life of Pi*, Piscine is not confronted with such tribulation. Yet, the common denominator remains the fact that Bala's refugees and Martel's Piscine are expected to speak and speak up. Before claiming a refugee status, a victim or survivor's status need to be claimed. A refugee's demeanour is ascertained in order to see whether he or she can be a good refugee or not. Piscine goes through this demeanour test towards the end of the novel where he is expected to narrate a straightforward account emanating from his role of a shipwreck victim and then survivor to the Japanese ship investigators, and what he does is invent a story, or rather two of them. One version is apparently reserved for the reader, and another one for both, the reader and the investigators towards the end of the novel. Can one narrate in a linear manner after having experienced a traumatic experience?

The novel's narrative strategy relies on the primacy of Piscine's soliloquy that lasts almost till the end of the novel that gives the impression that the vast ocean is a theatre. His imminent spectators are the mute animals. This strategy helps in underlining the overbearing solitude of the survivor: And at the same time his account remains untallied as there is no other survivor. In fact, the sole other survivor, the Bengal tiger conveniently leaves his company at his arrival on the Mexican beach, never to be found again.

The reader delves into the psychological conditions of the main protagonist: Piscine is handed over the agency on his current situation/ on his narratives, paradoxically, he or for that matter no survivor/victim chose their situation. The reader is under the obligation to believe his fairy-tale narratives. Travelling in an Ocean on a wooden raft for more than seven months in the company of a Bengal tiger, and discovering elements that almost appear like fantasy, it appears that trauma may lead to a creation or recreation of one's story. A similar narrative strategy appeared in *Train of Life* by Radu Mihaileanu in which the lead character creates a hilarious tale of their escape from a Nazi invasion of their village. A tragicomedy, and a road movie, or rather a track movie, as most of the action takes place on a train journey. As opposed to a 15 year old Piscine, the audience watch *Train of Life* through the eyes of a town lunatic. The common denominator in both movies being the innocence of the narrators and their ability to create a story for themselves in order to survive the trauma. Another common element could be the use of humour in case of Piscine, which actually makes the story both incredible and non-credible (Martel 2001:167). This survival guide reads like gallows humour in the middle of the ocean.

This document that Pi seems to remember by heart, makes him comment that even in despair he would not drink Piss as he was often bullied and taunted because of the other variant of his name pronounced as 'Pi'. And to the fact that 'And the gastronomic suggestions only confirmed to my mind that the English didn't know the meaning of the word *food*'. (Martel, 2001:167). The narrator's sense of humour usually come to an end with the bouts of rationale also leading to hopelessness 'a castaway's worst mistake is to hope too much and do too little' (Martel 2001:168).

The ship named *Tsimtsum* on which the whole family is travelling with their animals from the Pondicherry Zoo, takes its inspiration from the Biblical myth of Noah's ark. This results in the creation of two different narratives with one having a predominantly animal characters and the other one with human being at the core of the narration. We thereby come across the development of a new type of ecosystem, with animals, humans and fish all becoming a part of the same story as if the writer were telling us that there cannot be a survival story emanating from the sea that does not have other type of characters than just human beings.

Pi had imposed upon himself a religious shroud before the tragedy occurs- he has visited all possible religious places for praying and even starts calling atheism as just another form of religion; stops eating all type of meat. This religious cloak starting showing wear and tear when he is confronted with the reality of a survivor. He eats raw fish, turtles, and even dolphins by killing them with his own hands.

The religious dimension plays a vital role in most of the survivor tales, Charlotte Innes refers to the novel 'as a religious book that addresses to a non-religious person'. *Goat Days* (2008) by Benyamin was another first person account of a migrant. Benyamin, and Piscine, in these novels, revive the attraction towards a religious dimension in the middle of the tragedy. The proverbial dichotomy between religion and rationality outside the parameters of tragedy appears to blurring during a tragedy that had certainly occurred due to a human error.

The religious dimension, its absence towards the middle of the story, the use of humour are the elements that Janet Reno would call 'a healing process in his or her story' (Quoted by Rebecca Duncan, 169). Piscine, after a bout of religious flirtation with gods from all religions that are available in India while he had been living a quiet life with his parents, discovers a new way of treating the tragedy that has befallen him in the Ocean: Story creation although takes him far away from his metaphysical belief system that he previously had as he discovers like Max Schulz from the *Nazi and the Barber* by Edgar Hilsenrath that

God remains unavailable in the time of life threatening crisis, it brings him closer to an intellectual exercise that allows him to delve into the reality of the situation. Piscine thereby loses his innocence at the altar of a life threatening situation, which also translates to his coming of age and thereby adhering to pragmatism. The only aspect of innocence lies in the conscience where Pi knits a tale that suits the reader, and that is not necessarily true.

Even before the shipwreck, Piscine had realized that his journey would not be that of a traveller: ‘The ship was no luxury liner. It was a grimy, hardworking cargo ship not designed for paying passengers or for their comfort’(Martel 2001:101), another uncomfortable element that points towards the perilous nature of the journey is that Piscine and his brother had been aware of the perils they were running by being on that ship: “Something was wrong with the engines, he said. Did something go wrong with the fixing of them? I don’t know. I don’t think anyone will ever know. The answer is a mystery lying at the bottom of thousands of feet of water.” *Tsimtsum* was bound to sink right from the beginning. Moreover, the ship had a Panama Flag, a BBC maritime report that suggests that Panama registered ships had high rate of accidents as on many occasions the fitness certificates were just bought. As a migrant, the tragedy becomes more poignant as there was the possibility of not taking the journey and saving the family from the immediate death, the other possibility would have been staying back in the home country and nurturing wounds of oppression and despair.

The fictionality of the novel appears on many levels, and it appears almost as if the writer had not done his homework before writing the novel: Martel has chosen the surname Patel for Piscine and his family, a surname more prominent in the western part of India, and less in the South. From all accounts, Pondicherry possess no Zoo, never had one. Piscine uses miles and pounds as measures whereas it is predominantly the metric system that is used in India. His maternal uncle has got two passports, French and Indian, which has never been possible according to the Indian laws (Martel 2001:73). Moreover in the 70s, the diegetic time in the novel, the UK and the USA were the primary choices for an immigrant.

The ship sinks and along with sinks Piscine’s innocence. It is also a coming of age novel. In his life he is supposed to come to terms with the fact of having survived when other perished. Pi’s life is a proof that a survivor need to face other challenges than the immediate survival. As a matter of fact, the immediate survival merely separates the survivor from a victim, the trauma that comes along with the guilt of having survived, as it was the case with

Mahindan in *the Boat People* or with Primo Levi, builds up another reality in which loss becomes a reality of their day to day life, and their own survival becomes a necessity in the face of a tragedy.

II-

As Piscine sees it, the decision of fleeing was imposed upon him by his father, he was never in favour of fleeing India in order to go to Canada, the decision was reached at a drop of hat due to the upcoming sufferings and due to the fact that they had time and resources to flee the country (Martel 2001:91). This aspect of the novel highlights the horrific dimension of surviving: it is mainly those people who manage to flee and probably survive who can obtain means for doing that. Similarly, in *the Boat People*, Mahindan was required to spend all his savings, sell the jewellery of his defunct wife, and steal from the dead bodies, in order to obtain 1 and a half place on the boat that carried them to Canada, it was an impossible feat for other victims who stayed back. The child inside Pi, and Mahindan's child in *the Boat people* both are coincidentally reluctant to leave their homeland not that they are not afraid of the situation but in their innocent mind, they appear to feel that there might be a solution to every problem.

Pi's story further reveals another darker peril that puts into test the very notion of humanity, defined by Cambridge dictionary as just 'All people'. Primo Levi underlined the predicament of a survivor in very first survivor account *If This is a man* (1959), the title itself raises the question over the existence of putative elements of humanity, or towards prevalence or even existence of humanity while facing a near-death experience. Humanity that is supposed to be a pillar on which respect and goodness are based.

Pi's trauma stems from the loss of his family that was on board with him. However, most of his immediate bereavement period is marred by his attempts to keep himself alive, in the story number one, from a predator, the Bengal tiger, and in story number 2, from the French cook who has turned cannibalistic, and from hunger and tiredness. "I was no longer crying because of my family or because of my impending death. I was far too numb to consider either. I was crying because I was exceedingly tired and it was time to get rest" (Martel 2001:131). Pi's real struggle has not even yet started, he is just in the middle of this 300 plus pages novel and of nowhere. This idea of an imminent death and its paradox is also portrayed as irony by Levi in *the Drowned and the Saved*, "because of the constant imminence of death there was no time to concentrate on the idea of death."

Pi discovers that vegetarianism, which was central to his belief system in all religions, can never protect him from an imminent death, and his belief system cannot either. “I descended to a level of savagery I never imagined possible” (Martel 2001:197). This journey reveals in him a nature that he would otherwise have abhorred: a converted vegetarian to the core before the shipwreck, he starts eating meat and any other creature that he comes across in the ocean.

Pi’s survival strategy is a reminder of how a survivor turns against the things he considers most sacred: life. In this allegorical quest of life, only the best one survives. As he keeps rowing the raft on which he has taken refuge from the tiger, he reminds his reader that a distress does not always come with the lack of alertness towards one’s situation, in fact the other way around.

Pi is alert to his surroundings and to the death toll. His alertness reaches such a high level that one instantly starts comparing it with his insouciance of the past, and the reader thereby realizes that his previous self has died along with other victims. He starts building his own raft in order to get separated from lifeboat because there is a tiger in it. The building of the raft takes a lot of patience, energy, and nautical techniques that allows it to remain afloat even during the stormy waves. The description of the lifeboat, “It was three and a half feet deep, eight feet wide and twenty-six feet long, exactly. I know because it was printed on one of the side benches in black letters.” (Martel 2001:137) and later on a process by process description of raft building, insinuates that Pi’s memoir is a construct.

A construct that enables the story to appear functional even memory lapses. A construct that is nearly impossible in an “authentic account”. When Primo Levi was referring to the absences of a real witness account in his *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986) due to the death of the witness in the camps, he was probably counting himself as another survivor- and not as a witness-but his suicide few years later incarnated in him the death of the survivor too, as a matter of fact, he had never survived, and only had escaped death. Pi’s narration reveals similar fractures left due to this traumatic experience. The creation of a new self that comes up with two different stories of his survival, one for the reader, and another one for the investigators makes the reader aware of his fragmented account not only of his voyage in the ocean but also of what had happened before that.

Is he not just another survivor of a shipwreck running from a war or from a genocide, who just created a story of a zoo in Pondicherry that had never existed, and of his Indian maternal

uncle holding two passports, and started talking to his Canadian reader and the post-destruction host in the language that the latter understood, using miles instead of kms and pounds instead of kilos? (Martel 2001:27) A creation that also reminds us of Georges Perec's *W or the memories of childhood* (1988) –intended pun double V- or the movie *Train of Life* by Radu Mihai, or in which the last scene zoom on the grinning face of the fool reveals to the audience that his whole story was a creation, or what Reno calls, a healing process within the confines of the concentration camp. “Did he say that? Or am I remembering the lines of later atheists?” Pi stick to this line of thought throughout the novel, and towards the end when he is forced to question his narrative, he comes with another even ruthless story of crime and murder. In addition, Pi asks the Japanese ship insurance investigators ‘Doesn't the telling of something always become a story’, (302), when he is asked by them not to narrate a story but to give a ‘straight forward account’ of what happened. Echoing thereby what Levi said “This very book is drenched in memory . . . it draws from a suspect source and must be protected against itself” (34).”, referring to *the Drowned and the Saved*.

The creation of story thereby also become a survival strategy that enables Pi to come to terms with his traumatic self. The same traumatic self that has ironically provided (Martel 2001:148) an impetus for Pi to live if only for the reason to narrate his account, deciding to survive if only to narrate what happened, and thereby joining some of the survivors in Primo Lévi's account who solely survived with an aim to tell the world what happened to them.

Conclusion:

Whereas Levi uses the allegory of shipwreck for the title of his Holocaust memoir *The Drowned and the Saved*, Martel uses allegorical elements such as the name of the ship *Tsimtsum*, a Hebraic word that means (Divine) presence through absence, gets inspired from Art Spiegelman's *Maus* for his animal characters, and also Moacyr Scliar for his *Max and the Cats*, another survivor tale that emanates from World War II.

The Tiger, Richard Parker, as it comes to the knowledge of the reader towards the end, and through the second story was Pi's alter ego, the allegorical form that he employs for himself stems out from the fact that not only he was ferocious and managed to kill the French cook, but also managed to survive all alone in a Darwinian mode, as survival of the fittest and strongest, ‘such a superior predator’ (Martel 2001:136)

The novel retains its allegorical aspect with its maintaining of nationalities. The cook is not French as a matter of chance, it allows the author to have a historical link with the story: ‘You monster! You animal! How could you? He’s human! He’s your own kind!’ pointing towards the French implication in Holocaust.

In his interview to Ruth Franklin, Yann Martel said “The idea of turning around and killing your friends, neighbours ... The Holocaust stayed in my mind as a surreal oddity,” and further, that it had haunted him throughout life.

With life of Pi, and the later animal fiction, *Beatrice and Virgil*, Martel keeps on experimenting with literature on survivors and bringing the debate to the fore whether literary tools like allegories and personalization can be accepted to depict the tragedy of survivors.

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