

Documentary Realism in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

Trilochan Singh Sangha
Associate Professor,
School of Humanities,
Lovely Professional University,
Phagwara, Punjab, India.

Abstract

In his 2002 Booker Prize winning novel, *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel weaves a fabulous story around postmodern issues such as degree of legitimacy of reason over imagination, science over religion, materialism over idealism, and fact over fiction. Told in a flashback mode, and by limiting himself to documentation, Yann Martel invites the readers to go with him through the survival story to draw their own conclusions. His ability to make Pi 'document' minute details, even under extreme threatening conditions, is an attempt at realism. The twisting of facts that he managed with aplomb, exonerates Yann Martel from simply duplicating Moacyr Scliar's *Max and the Cats*, which he was accused of.

Key Words: realism, postmodern, indulgence, twisting, deconstruction

Introduction

Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, an apparent philosophical treatise, with syncretisation of religions and science, is a survivor narrative combining the of art bildungsroman, fantasy, and extended dramatic monologues. Assuming the role of a dramatist, Yann Martel uses the 'author's note' to let the reader know the circumstances under which he embarked on the novel writing errand. Landing in Bombay, during his second visit to India, the author headed for Matheran near Bombay.

He says he was trying to focus on writing a story set in Portugal in 1939. However, discarding the idea as it did not fructify, he moves to Pondicherry, where, sitting in the Indian Coffee House on Nehru Street, he happens to meet Mr. Adirubasamy, an elderly man who said, "I have a story that will make you believe in God." (p.2) The anticipated suspicion of the setting of the story being in ancient Roman Empire or the seventh-century Arabia, made Adirubasamy assure him: "No, no. It starts right here in Pondicherry just a few years back, and it ends, I am delighted to tell you, in the very country you come from. And it will make me believe in God?" (p.2)

As a facade for assuring the readers of an authentic narrative, the author mentions: "It seemed natural that Mr. Patel's story should be told mostly in the first person, in his voice and through his eyes." (p.3) The real novel starts with **PART ONE** set in **Toronto and**

Pondicherry, in which, Chapters 1, 3-5, 7-11, 13-14, 16-29, 34-35 are handed over directly to Pi, the protagonist. The author intervenes in Chapters 2, 6, 12, 15, 30, 33, 36. To start with, Pi talks about his life in Canada after his ordeal at the Pacific. From Chapter 3 to 11, Pi narrates his life at Pondicherry from the age of 12 to 15.

In Chapter 2, the author enters to give a very brief description of Pi that he lives in Scarborough, is hardly forty years, and “speaks quickly with hands flitting.” In Chapter 6, the author briefly intervenes to give the readers a feel of the food and Indianness of Pi’s home in Canada, whenever he went there. Again, the author pops in Chapter 12 for a brief spell to remind the reader that “It’s nothing I say (I say very little). It’s his own story that does it.” He states how Pi’s memory worked during the story telling and that the author was served spicy South Indian dishes. This intervention, though unwanted, is technical reminder about the author’s presence there. In Chapter 15, the author appears again and describes Pi’s home, where framed images of Ganesha, Krishna, Laxmi, Parvati, Shakti, Shiva as Nataraja, Simpatico, Virgin Mary of Guadalupe, Kaaba, Virgin Mary, coexist along with bells, conches, a Cross, a rug, lamps, wicks and such stuff to create a syncretic ambience of Pi’s religious practices. In Chapter 30, the author makes himself present again to let us know about Mrs. Patel, Meena, as she prefers to be called, carrying a pharmacist’s coat on her arm, and is watched by the author as she kisses Pi before she leaves for her work. In Chapter 33, while going through the family memorabilia at Pi’s place, the author views photographs of Pi’s graduation and marriage in Canada, honeymoon at Niagara Falls. He recognizes the photos of younger Adirubasamy (Mamaji), Mr. Patel (senior), Richard Parker, but on his reminding that Pi’s mother’s is not there, Pi closes the book. Part One closes with the author taking charge in Chapter 36. He is sitting in Pi’s home; Nikhil, Pi’s son, who shouts to announce Pi’s arrival, “Dad! The writer’s here,” greets the author curtly and rush out to play. Usha, the 4 year daughter, Pi, and the author engage in small talk.

In Chapters 37 and 38 of **PART TWO**, set in **The Pacific Ocean**, we see Pi narrate the journey starting from Madras, crossing the Bay of Bengal, through the Strait of Malacca, negotiating past Singapore, to Manila, and to the Pacific. The shipwreck occurs in Chapters 39 and continues through Chapter 40. From Chapters 41 onward, Pi continues narrating his ordeal, and states in Chapter 73 that he kept a diary. Chapter 75 is just one liner. While continuing his story in Chapter 89, Pi remarks: “These are the last pages of my diary: This was my last entry.” In Chapter 92, the mysterious floating island is

reached; and the fantasy of meercats and carnivorous trees is described in Chapter 93. Resuming their journey, Mexico is reached in Chapter 94, where Richard Parker elopes. Pi, now an orphan for the second time, is picked by the Mexican police from the beach. Pi expresses his gratitude to the Mexican and Canadian officials, the doctors and nurses who nursed him to health, and his foster mother, and his education at University of Toronto.

The scene shifts to **Benito Juarez Infirmary, Tomatlan, Mexico** in **PART THREE**. Chapter 95, is devoted to the authorial narration as to how he met Mr. Tomohiro Okamoto, by then retired, an officer in Maritime Department of Japanese Ministry of Transport, and got linked to the investigation story of the sinking of the Japanese ship Tsimtsum in the Pacific, through the lone survivor reported to have landed in Mexico. The author explains: “He and Mr. Chiba spoke with Piscine Molitor Patel, in English, for close to three hours, taping the conversation. What follows are excerpts from the verbatim transcript. I am grateful to Mr. Okamoto for having made available to me a copy of the tape and of his final report. For the sake of clarity I have indicated who is speaking when it is not immediately apparent. Portions printed in a different font were spoken in Japanese, which I had translated.” (p.156) Chapter 96 presents the taped conversation, starting with the maritime officers introducing themselves to Pi). Chapter 97 is of just two words: “The story.” This leaves some ambiguity. Anyway, Chapter 98 shows the recorded conversation between Chiba and Okamoto, who express their disbelief and break off for a short while. In Chapter 99, the interview is resumed; Pi is asked by Mr Chiba and Okamoto for another version of the story. In a way, these four chapters are in third person omniscient narration mode. The author resurfaces in Chapter 100, the last one, where he refers to the report submitted by Okamoto regarding their findings.

In spite of the painstaking care to justify the story and establish its credibility, Martel leaves a glaring lacuna. During the entire narration by Pi, the author never butts in with a ‘yes’, ‘Oh’, ‘auw’, ‘My God!’, ‘Uhh’, ‘What happened then?’ etc. to keep the story going. The discussion between the author and Pi is limited to: “I went to see him again. ‘What's your religion about?’ I asked”. “His eyes lit up.” “It is about the Beloved, he replied.” (19) Even in Chapter 36, where we get to see the author talking with Pi, the conversation is limited to Pi’s daughter, Usha, only. It is Pi who takes to second person address like: “How does it survive, you might ask.” (p.5)

Regarding his meeting with Pi in Toronto (Canada), the author says: “We met many times. He showed me the diary he kept during the 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.” (p.3) How come, the author never drops a hint or exclaims that such and such event was awesome, unbelievable, or could raise hair on end? And for sake of realism, Martel descends to simple documentation. After all, he had promised in the “author’s note” that we would allow Pi all the freedom for unadulterated account of the developments.

Again Pi’s extended monologues do, strangely, change to dialogues in Chapter 90 for depiction of Pi’s conversation with Richard Parker. This is in line with the narrative in the genre of fantasy or fable. The dialogues are resumed in Chapters 96 to 99, to depict the playing of the recorded conversations between Pi and the Japanese investigating team, or among the latter, in between, or during the little “break”. In a way, this portion is entirely dramatic, like a radio play, the sounds are there but the visuals are missing. As a stage director, and to link the audios in Chapters 96 to 99, the author addresses the reader at the end of Chapter 95:

“He and Mr. Chiba spoke with Piscine Molitor Patel, in English, for close to three hours, taping the conversation. What follows are excerpts from the verbatim transcript. I am grateful to Mr. Okamoto for having made available to me a copy of the tape and of his final report. For the sake of clarity I have indicated who is speaking when it is not immediately apparent. Portions printed in a different font were spoken in Japanese, which I had translated.” (p.156)

To link the story in PART THREE, Martel writes in the “author’s note”: “Nearly a year later, after considerable difficulties, I received a tape and a report from the Japanese Ministry of Transport. It was as I listened to that tape that I agreed with Mr. Adirubasamy that this was, indeed, a story to make you believe in God.” (p.3)

Martel turns the “author’s note”, into a preface towards the end, as he concludes the acknowledgements with, “As for the spark of life, I owe it to Mr. Moacyr Scliar. Lastly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to that great institution, the Canada Council for the Arts, without whose grant I could not have brought together this story that has nothing to do with Portugal in 1939.” (p.3) Martel, slyly, embeds a message for the readers also: “If we, citizens, do not support our artists, then we sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality and we end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams.” (p.3)

As regards Martel’s understanding of the process of novel writing, he writes in the

“author’s note” that flat facts do not work. Fiction is “the selective transforming of reality; the twisting of it to bring out its essence.” (1) Towards the end of the novel, Martel uses Okamoto as a ploy to disbelieve Pi’s story of the sinking of the ship and his survival in the company of a ferocious tiger. On the pretext of knowing “the real happenings”, Pi is made to substitute the animals with human beings. The alternate version is considered better, though it does not in any way solve the mystery of the missing ship, admits Okamoto. You cannot find much faults with his narrative technique, as he is not secretive when he says: Reality is how we interpret it, and that interpretation involves imagination which means that all reality is to some extent a fiction. After all, a fable is also twisting of facts to hook the reader, who also has the choice of indulging in the deconstruction of the content at his leisure and pleasure.

References

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