

STORYTELLING AS A PHILOSOPHICAL TOOL IN THE NOVEL LIFE OF PI

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Stories are inherent in humankind in contrast to other species. With language was born stories as every generation used storytelling to pass their knowledge one after the other. We enjoy this liberty as storytelling does not have any rules or restrictions. The essence of storytelling is the imaginative power to create something fictional and only humankind has the ability to create and live in fiction. "Sapiens, in contrast, live in triple - layered reality." (Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* 181). Stories have always been the root of all different cultures across the globe and that makes up each culture unique in its identity. Human beings, disregard the similarity in species and identify each other with his or her culture, unlike other animals or other organisms which identify each other by its own species. The impact of storytelling among humans has gone way too far that we distinguish or identify each other through stories that we believe in. "Telling effective stories is not easy. The difficulty lies not in telling the story, but in convincing everyone else to believe it." (Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* 31)

Storytelling is an art used in various fields. In the field of philosophy, storytelling is used as a tool to shadow deepest thoughts in an interesting, thought provoking and simplified manner. To throw limelight on philosophy, stories clearly exhibit patterns amidst the chaos. Patterns in philosophical stories deal with the subjective transformation of perceiving the world and life. These stories allow the readers to ponder on the raw realities or the bitter truths of life. In the finite pages run an eternal echo of truth and beauty buried between the lines. It puts the readers into a position like "walking through a maze whose walls rearrange themselves with each step you take." (Gleick 24) At the end, the stories begin to unfurl the pattern lurking amidst the chaos. Chaos that brings order refreshes the readers with new ideas about truth and beauty in their minds. In *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, the author says:

The storytelling mind is allergic to uncertainty, randomness, and coincidence. It is addicted to meaning. If the storytelling mind cannot find meaningful patterns in the world, it will try to impose them. In short, the storytelling mind is a factory that churns out true stories when it can, but will manufacture lies when it can't. (Gottschall)

In the novel *Life of Pi*, the author Yann Martel uses Piscine Patel or Pi, the protagonist, as his voice to deliver a story that is bitter, raw and unpredictable yet beautiful. In the Author's Note, he quotes about what brought him to writing this novel and about the strangeness in writing fiction. He says "That's what fiction is about, isn't it, the selective transformation of reality? The twisting of it to bring out its essence?" (Martel) His humble confession that the story will instill faith in God moves the readers further to read. Pi, the narrator who is a character himself narrates his story as age and experience teach him the essence of life. The story begins with his thesis on sloths which takes the readers to his current life in Canada. The sudden shift to missing Richard Parker with a slight indication of nightmarish love story creates a spark within the readers as to who the new human character, as the name suggests, could be. The next scene shifts to Mexico with nurses taking care of Pi and the time when hunting for food and quenching the thirst for himself and Richard Parker became his goals. Though the next story describes his childhood and his family, the readers are continuously given the impression that something greater than this is about to set in. The childhood story suggests his identity crisis as his name has often been ridiculed due to the pronunciation that sounded something miserable and funny. His frustration for identity in classrooms makes Pi look at religion as a place to settle comfortably. As a teenager, Piscine's quest for truth in religions draws him into following all three religions – Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. Polytheism is possible in a

country like India as many stories can happen simultaneously. He perceives religions as different stories bounded with different rituals and with extraordinary faith in some superhuman power or powers. “Surely this religion had more than one story in its bag – religions abound with stories.” (Martel 53)

Pi narrates the origin of his religious beliefs in India, accompanied by his justifications in believing each of those. This religious hunt serves the purpose till the end as the author takes the readers to Pi’s current home in Canada where he has hung photo frames of Lord Ganesha, Krishna, Christ, Virgin Mary, Shiva and many other Gods and Goddesses. Readers are exposed to Pi’s random beliefs that ascertain his equal faith in multiple religions. It surprises the readers with these religious stories as the chaotic randomness emerges into a pattern. His journey as a child has mostly been lonely and he has self – taught himself to be comfortable in his solitude. At one point, when Pi was asked to choose any one of the three religions, he said he can’t choose one as he just wants to love God. Pi democratically believes that following multiple religions is equal to having as many passports as possible to travel to different nations.

Pi’s feelings towards the animals of his father’s zoo was more empathetic and merciful. In the beginning of his narrative, readers learn that he is a doctorate in zoology and his fondness for animals is reflected right from his childhood. His close observations and kindness on animals can be noted when he describes the features and mood of all the animals in the zoo. His father’s demonstration of how fierce and unapologetic tigers can be, scares Pi to his very core. However his fascination for animals continued till his adult life.

Politics is another interesting story, like religion, as far as the commoners are not the puppets in their play. The Emergency Act declared in India, is the nonlinear political cause of Pi’s upturn of life. His family’s migration to Canada was not an ordinary sail as they had to leave the comforting chaos of the secular country like India. Shipwreck in an ocean seem to be a random and frightening disaster that pushes Pi to the brink of life. Like any other fisherman or sailor, Pi would have had a tough, weather- beaten end but it takes an extraordinary turn when he is put back on the map with Richard Parker, a tiger; a hyena; a zebra and Orange Juice, an orangutan of his father’s zoo. The author uses these characters and the setting to bring the ruggedness of time. To settle with the fact that he has lost his family forever has not risen in him as he had the hope somewhere in the corner of his heart that his family would have been saved. The act of hyena alarms the readers as it does not spare anyone except Pi and Richard Parker. This merciless quality symbolizes the cold blooded brutality hidden within every human being when hunger strikes. Thirst is a recurring symbol throughout the novel that represents Pi’s thirst for truth itself. Richard Parker kills hyena and that leaves the two of them on the life boat. Nature gives us clues when we are in a passionate pursuit to find those. Pi is given a little ray of hope when he finds that there are things to keep him alive in the life boat. The need for survival starts when Richard Parker seeks help from Pi to survive. Though politics is a man-made fiction, a political riot is a real suffering. So was the riot in the life of Pi who lost his family and sometimes, almost everything.

The next sequence in his story is about his days of survival in a lifeboat with the tiger. He overcomes fear by training Richard Parker in such a way that his only hope became the tiger. He describes the vast ocean and its inhabitants similar to the human world. He sees harmony flowing in waters inspite of the variety of species. He kills infinite number of fishes to feed the tiger full and also himself. His desperate need to disconnect himself with his religious beliefs in order to kill and eat fishes force him to question the framework of life. Readers are surprised to witness when the orthodox Pi kills fishes and continues to have the same amount of faith in God. Pi introduces a story where faith and reason can sometimes simultaneously go hand in hand. The tip to keep himself alive was to keep himself busy and Pi tried to follow the same schedule all day. This could keep himself away from negative thoughts such as fear, loneliness, despair and death. “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.” (Martel 208)

When the story seems to be slow pacing, Pi starts an imaginary conversation with some voice distant that allows him to be leisurely mad for some time. Another great turn of event is when he reaches a carnivorous island where he is given a ray of hope but is soon taken away as life is not possible there. He chooses to flee with Richard Parker. The next scene shifts off to the shores of Mexico where Pi is rescued and is been interviewed by the Japanese Ministry of Transport and he narrates two different stories with two different storylines but with three common factors such as the sinking of the ship, losing his family and his survival. The first story is his journey with Richard Parker and other animals and the second story is a story within a story that has humans instead of the animals. The officials find the first one unbelievable than the second one. However their report suggested that they preferred to believe the first story. When the Japanese officials preferred to believe in the story with animals, Pi says, “And so it goes with God.” Readers are shown two different roads that both rely on simple faith and not reason. However readers choose to believe in the first story as that is an interesting tale of adventure, faith and hope though there is no evidence to back the story up. Religion offers two sides of good and evil and Pi takes the good side as humanity needs hope.

Storytelling has the power to stimulate hormones such as dopamine, oxytocin, cortisol, endorphin, and adrenaline. Pi’s story puts the readers to empathy as he journeys through an identity crisis due to his name, his ambiguous relationship with Gods and Goddesses, his loss of family, his lonely life at ocean with Richard Parker. It brings the readers a sense of fear when Pi struggles to survive the shipwreck, his fragile relationship with the tiger and his nail-biting 227 days of life in the ocean. A sense of awe and wonder covers the readers up when Pi describes the beauty in all religions, the life of the aquatic world like the human world and finally his narration of his journey. It is a story that makes the readers think about the several positions each of us can be in during any stage in life. Though the readers sail along the author, especially in choosing the first story, we often give up faith in God and hope when adversities hit us. Pi gives us a clear hint of laughable rituals in all the religions sarcastically but he still chooses to believe in all of those because there are several things in this universe that are still mysteries. If Gods or Goddesses replace the mysteries, then humankind has a comforting story to rely upon during the difficult times. Yann Martel hides philosophy in each of the mind blowing characters that he has spun to bring out the raw truth that suffering cannot be avoided, however deep our faith in God is. However, faith in God can be the new strength at odd times. Storytelling, for the author, is a comfortable place to settle his philosophies through the voice of Pi, a believer who has suffered and survived.

References:

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