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The Narrative of Subjugation: Ethical Introspection on the Notion of Othering in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

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Abstract:

Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* yields a grand narrative for exploring ecocriticism, anthropocentrism, and the ethics of othering. In this novel, Pi Patel, abandoned on a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger, challenges human-centric worldviews by exemplifying the complex linkage between humans and the planetary life. In this notion, Pi's survival is not just a subjective voyage but also an encounter with the non-human "other," as animals, chiefly the tiger, are reconstructed from just symbols of danger to partners in existence. Yann Martel elucidates the idea of "othering" through the lens of Pi Patel's correlation with the natural world, particularly animals. This study also highlights how human beings create bifurcation between themselves and non-human animals, by orienting themselves as superior, rational, and dominant, whereas animals are often symbolized as inferior or "other." These novel critiques anthropocentrism by dislodging human beings from the centre of the ecosystem, urging to acknowledge animals as sentient beings for the rightful ethical consideration. Furthermore, it scrutinizes the ethics of othering, and highlights how humans' quest for their meaning and survival, often leads to devaluation and objectify non-human animals. Ultimately, *Life of Pi* summons a reevaluation of our connection with the natural world, promoting for a more inclusive and ethical interpretation of "otherness."

Keywords:

Animality, Anthropocentrism, Animal agency, biopolitics ecological ethics, Othering, relationality, sentience.

I. Introduction

As a result of scientific progress, humans gradually detached themselves from animals and began to live separately. Charles Darwin devised the theory of evolution, by suggesting that humans evolved from apes. Nonetheless, this theory is still a point of disagreement. In spite of that, it sheds light on physical progression. The modifications occur in the actions of each animal, then in their inherent traits. In this novel, anthropocentrism is a prominent theme that indicates both the protagonist's context and the broader narrative. Anthropocentrism is a moral standard that considers humans as the central and prominent beings on Earth. As a monistic perspective, it rushes into the chain of command or superiority by prioritizing one group (humans) over the "other". This research provides a nuanced analysis of anthropocentrism and the concept of animality in relation to the settings within which the narratives unveiled. Additionally, it questions the humanity's perceived dominance over the other species and underscores the how the utilitarian way of animals is treated in human-centred frameworks.

The principle essence of *Life of Pi* has been decoded in numerous ways by readers and literary critics worldwide. For many, its hub on Pi's correlation with the tiger named, Richard Parker; for others, it relies on the displacement of humans in favour of animals. However, a few readers view the novel's main theme as the Martel's distinct approach to religion and its importance in human life. This study argues that the Martel's assessment on humanity, particularly the human tendency to place itself at the focal point of any story whether about animals or gods. Martel entangles various stories that shape Pi's life, emphasizing the importance of fiction in shaping human identity and examining the relationships between the human world, the natural

world, and the narrative itself. Though Pi approves the animal story, the concluding chapter reveals that the only story humans contemplate “real” is the one in which animals are depicted with human-like attributes.

The notion of 'representation' is broad and has been extensively debated from the period of Aristotle and Plato. Meanwhile, 'object,' 'manner,' and 'means' are the three fundamental features to assess in any representation. Here, the word 'means' defines the language. Further the 'object' might vary with individual text, but the 'manner' which it is used truly to shape how that discourse is comprehended and interpreted. This analysis examines the representation and the portrayal of animals in the Booker Prize novel called *Life of Pi*. This paper posits that the Western or the occidental intellectual history has constantly involved in the practice of segregating or 'othering' animals, by using an animal imagery as a means of 'othering' humans. On account of Berger's argument that,

“Animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them” (14).

This research paper attempts the intrinsic anthropocentric principles of the protagonist, who uses animals as a mechanism to lead a "better story."

II. The Power Politics of Representation: Subjugation and Othering

The eminent spiritual tone embedded in this narrative acts as a key indication of the anthropocentric or egocentric outlook inherent in the novel. In the outset of the novel, the narrator says that it is “a story that will make you believe in God” (Martel 9). However, all the theological belief system in the world is rooted on the anthropocentric viewpoint. For example, the Genesis narrative in the Judeo-Christian Bible places humans at the pinnacle of the creation. The protagonist of the novel, Piscine Molitor Patel, has been disclosed to three religions and

fostered an equal connection to all of them which sets the tone for this narrative. Gregory Stephens has argued that “the religious overlay is an attempt to fudge the boundaries between fantasy and reality, something that would enable the readers to suspend disbelief when they read the story (43)”. However, the divinity and the anthropocentric enhancement of the narrative are mutually emphasizing, surpassing what Stephen notices.

The Bengal Tiger named Richard Parker and his fellow companion named Pi, shared their time in the Pacific Ocean following the shipwreck, signifies a vital role in affirming Pi Patel's theological belief. Richard Parker frightens to overpower and engulf the protagonist, almost similar to Shakespeare's Shylock seeks to overpower with Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*. Martel builds Pi's authenticity to narrate his nostalgic childhood and the adolescence, which he spent at Pondicherry Zoo in India, where, Mr. Santosh Patel his father served as a manager.

The initial days on the lifeboat after the wreckage were filled with constant fear and desperation for Pi. He anxious about the tiger would kill him at any circumstances, so he preferred to construct a catamaran or a raft and began his battle between Eros and Thanatos. The act of constructing a raft can be seen as a desperate effort by a young boy for his survival at sea for 227 days. The main factor of his anxiety proves to be the source of his perseverance. Pi Patel says that, “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.” (Martel 203).

The dread he developed in relation to the tiger has aroused from an anthropocentric action by his father during his infancy stage at the Pondicherry Zoo. The author gradually heightens the atmosphere in the opening of the narrative as a typical "bildungsroman," it is distinct from other novels due to its exclusive literary treatment of animals. In order to make the animals of the zoo strange, he portrays them through Pi's vantage point, whose enduring affection for them and grasp their regular behaviours by enforce the readers to view them in a recent way. His

father took him to a tiger that had been intentionally deprived of food for three days, and forced him to watch as the tiger pounced on a goat. This egoistic anthropocentric act operates at two-pronged roles within the narrative. From one perspective, it assigns the brutality as an innate quality of the tiger, which represent the fauna kingdom as a whole. The intentional starvation of the tiger is conveniently ignored. Though the discourse is narrated a long time after the incident, Pi is rendered here as a persona who acknowledge animals in the form of love and fails to address this nuance in detail. It's highly unlikely that someone with an exhaustive cognizance in individuals who have survived at sea would be ignorant of instances where starvation has driven humans to cannibalism.

The idea of othering or subjugating, as explained by Edward Said in his key contribution called *Orientalism*, is a critical notion that penetrates in this novel. This progression sets up a barbaric nature of the tiger, and also to amplifies the Pi's spirituality. There is no extensive discussion on the theological texts where Pi experienced before his traumatic challenges at the sea. Rather, it is mentioned that he prayed constantly, with no detailed clarification on his religious beliefs at that time. This perception of holism, unification, essence, and meaning is related to Richard Parker, which can be defined as the revival of pagan worship configurations. Bleakley says the subsequent description on animal forms of worship: "the most revered animals will be those raising strong 'negative' emotional response: awe, fear and anxiety. The mechanism through which religiosity is grounded is hypothesized as the sublimation of such emotions which would give rise to 'mental images perceived as natural forces'" (74).

III. Deconstructing Archetypes: Human and Non-Human Role Reversal

In this novel the intricate connection between a Bengal tiger, Richard Parker, and Pi unfolds as the Richard Parker plays the vital role of Pi's only comrade during his tough passage in Pacific

Ocean. The dichotomy established by the characters functions as the microcosm for the collective struggles of societal, cultural and ethical issues of anthropocentric ideology and the notion of othering. The protagonist should contend with his own prejudice and preconceptions in order to navigate the hazardous issues that emerges when he imposed to share his existence with a different entity where society has conventionally named as treacherous "other." This treacherous creature has provoked all the emotions in Pi, the greater part of his time was spent to look after the tiger. It is said that Pi devoted five times a day, and prayed over ten of his daily tasks to assist Richard Parker. This embodies the switching positions or role reversal in between human and animal. As Stephens articulates that Richard Parker eventually turning into a "master" or a "commander" image for Pi. This picturesque description symbiotically enhances the narrative, fluctuating between the threads of othering and religion. This might be interpreted through the correlations Bleakley draws to illustrate how belief system and the religious philosophies are formed.

To expand the dynamics of role reversal, the name of the tiger, Richard Parker itself operates as an intertextual allusion to Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. In this novel, a maritime disaster takes place; by letting Richard Parker and three crew members are the castaways in the lifeboat. Following the days of struggle at sea, Parker suggest that a person should give selfless sacrifice of their lives to defend the remaining three. There Parker is picked as the scapegoat. Exempting the human presence in the novel, it showcases the animal centric presence as a prominent role namely, Richard Parker and the three companions: a zebra, an orangutan, and a hyena. Unlike Poe's story, tiger named Richard Parker in *Life of Pi* feeds on the orangutan and zebra, which were killed by the hyena, and he finally slays and devours the hyena himself.

The second or the alternate version of Pi's story is matters as it uncovers the varied ways of othering. This version of the narrative, the zebra embodies as Taiwanese sailor, the orangutan

symbolises as Pi's mother, whereas the hyena represents as a cook, and Pi seizes himself as Richard Parker. The significant twist and turns are the limitation of characters. The Pi Patel, the initial chronicler explained a story placing him with the four animals, embraces the role of Richard Parker in the second version. This transition leads to the prior cited context of Richard Parker and the three creatures which is parallel to Poe's story. Martel's use of role reversal between Pi and Parker in order to study the motif of faith in the context of the plot. Upon further consideration, it could be observed that the second story is wholly a fictional fabrication of Pi's vision. He tells the Japanese officials, "You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently." (Martel 358).

This argument is truly challenging. Because in what way he creates such a story who survived 227 days at sea, notably when textual findings show he remains cognitively affected? In the course of his interaction with the Japanese executives, he keeps request for cookies, when he receives the cookies, he stores it for the upcoming phase.

In light of the hardship Pi experienced, his ability to create a new story generates uncertainty. On the contrary, if we view the longer story as the one that is imagined it seems to be reasonable, since he had 227 days to envisioned and enhance the discourse that could be revealed to the society. The second story incorporates the human cannibalism. While describing the second story, Pi adds the subjective statements and phrases full of empathy. This kind of subjective connotations are not present in his descriptions of zebra and the orangutan in the former story. In the former part, the emotional understanding is relatively monotonous, controlled by anxiety and faith, with a distinct absence of empathy which is prevailed in the second story. Notably, both the narrative ends up with the Charles Darwin theory of "survival of the fittest" which highlights the correlation between them. In the prior narration form, both

the Pi and Richard Parker sustained in the lifeboat. But in the later version of the story Pi believes the role of Richard Parker and survives.

As the tiger serves as a vital component in fortifying the Pi's hope, a person rooted in a pragmatic reasoning could interrogate why Pi did not get rid of the tiger. Pi's "Plan Number Seven: Keep Him Alive." (Martel 207), he maintained his alliance with Parker, because the tiger remains an incessant danger to his life. This brings closer to ponders that the first shortened story version might be trustworthy, as well as the disguise of keeping Richard Parker existence, he was finding options to guarantee his sustainability.

This style of writing is mirroring the Poe's story. With regard to this rendition, Parker remains alive and the fatalities of his voyagers become the resource for his survival. A French philosophers named Bachelard poses, "The quickest way to describe a human aberration is to compare it with animal behaviour." (110). The author attains this connotation in the first story by featuring the slaughter and homicide to the animals, validating these acts with the concept of the "survival of the fittest" which regulates the animal world. In order to cover up the Pi's internal cannibalism, humans are casted as animals in the form of being "othered" or "marginalized" which triggers to "[T]he animal becomes both the vehicle for the 'seeing' or imagining and the primary object of that 'seeing', while writing offers the ritual invocation of the animal familiar." (Bleakley 80)

IV. Future Scope of Research

Scholars should explore the various intersection across philosophy, literature and ecocriticism. By undergoing these research scholars can analyse the conventional human and animal hierarchies and also the biopolitical issues like how the power system operates and terminates each other. Scholar may also undergo the psychological analysis in the context of trauma, additionally the cultural and global perspectives in terms of hybridity and migration.

V. Conclusion

Martel's works adopts and reflects on ecocritical perspective which encourage readers to acknowledge the interconnectedness across the natural world, humans and animals. His pursuit for the absolute truth is chiefly addressing anthropocentrism.

To conclude, I would confess that the paradigm of the novel illustrates the anthropocentric outlook through Pi Patel. By doing this, he displaces the humans from the narrative's centre and the story reorients animals at the centre from the margins of the societal structure almost a postmodernist perspective. The humanistic and the religious doctrines, almost refrain the human as "other." *Life of Pi* reveals that the human world is shaped by the non-human interface, while the centre of the circle represents humanity is in harmony with the centre of the circle signifies Nature.

VI.

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