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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BOOK REVIEW: MARTEL YANN. LIFE OF PI. CANADA: RANDOM HOUSE OF CANADA, 2012.

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Abstract

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“I write to understand issues that are important to me, to express my creative energies and to pass the time in a meaningful way” says Yann Martel

This is what he did while writing an excellent piece of work, winner of Man Booker Prize for Fiction winning *Life of Pi* (2002). He was born in Salamanca, Spain in the year of 1963. He was born of Canadian parents who joined Canadian Foreign service. In addition to Canada he grew up in Costa, Rica, Spain, Mexico and France. He also travelled Iran, India and Turkey as an adult.

Yann Martel’s first book was published in 1993, *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* which was followed by *Self* (1996), his first novel, but he came into public eyes when he won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction for his second novel *Life of Pi* (2002). It is an awe-inspiring survival story with an overarching perspective of religion. This novel tends to change certain perspective of its reader. It is a story of a teenage boy, Pi Patel, who survives with a 450 pounds Royal Bengal Tiger for 227 days, just on a lifeboat, following with various anti-survival elements. This is a hard to believe story for the readers as well as for characters in the novel, yet fantastic.

“Tigers exist, lifeboat exist, oceans exist. Because the three have never come together in your narrow, limited experience, you refuse to believe that they might, yet the plain fact is that the Tsimtsum brought them together and they sank.” (pg: 299)

While writing *Life of Pi* Yann Martel did a lot of hard work. He says:-

“I would guess that most books come from the same mix of three elements: influence, inspiration and hardwork”.

His influence was a review by John Updike in the *New York Times Review of Books* of a novel by a Brazilian writer, *Moacyr Scliar*. It was about a zoo run by a Jewish family in Berlin who decides to immigrate to Brazil because of bad business. Because of a shipwreck one Jew ends up in a lifeboat with a black panther. His inspiration was India.

“I got to Matheran, the hill station closest to Bombay. It’s a small place...with beautiful views over the surrounded plains....The closest you get to the noises of a motor on Matheran’s street of five, reddish earth are the rumbling, harking sounds of Indians spewing out betel juice. The peace of place is blessed and utterly un-Indian. Suddenly, my mind was exploding with ideas....In jubilant minutes whole portions of the novel emerged fully formed: the lifeboat, the animals and religions, lent itself to such a story.”

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Yann Martel visited almost all the zoos he found in South India and spent time in temples, churches and mosques. He tried to get into the Indianness of his protagonist and explored urban setting for his novel. He also spent a year and a half in Canada for research.

Life of Pi is a novel about a boy Piscine Molitor Patel, known as Pi, who, with his family, leaves his home in Pondicherry along with his family due to some political stress in order to shift to Canada. They travel with all the animals in their zoo and unfortunately Tsimtsum, their ship, sinks and Pi is separated from his family. The tragedy is such that his whole family dies in the shipwreck and Pi is left with a zebra, a hyena and a 450- pounds male Bengal tiger in a life boat. Later orang-utan joins them. Hyena kills the zebra and orang-utan, and later, tiger kills the hyena. Pi is left with Richard Parker, the Bengal tiger. Yet, he survives.

“My suffering left me sad and gloomy.” This is how the reader is introduced to the novel. Then we are told that the narrator that is Pi was saved. It is clear that some tragedy had taken place. Nature and the source of tragedy are not clear. This creates suspense and arouses interest of the reader. We are left to think who Richard Parker is and what might have happened. This technique is appreciable. Further we come to know about his study of zoology and religion. His life in Pondicherry zoo was interesting. He came to know about the nature of animal. After this comes a very interesting perspective of Pi about the freedom of animals. This perspective of his tends to change the mind of the reader. According to Pi animals are free in zoo, they live like a king, they get proper care, food in time and also medications whereas in wild they are not sure of the food and care, medication is not possible, they have to strife for food and protect themselves of danger. They cannot rest in peace a there will always be a danger of being eaten up or killed. Yes the boundary is restricted in a zoo, one cannot go beyond, but one thing is true that if an animal is asked to make a choice between a zoo and wild. It will most probably choose zoo. Obviously, we are more comfortable in our home and not in wild. We humans, live in a zoo enclosure named house.

“In a zoo, we do for animals what we have done for ourselves with houses: we bring together in a small space what in the wild is spread out.”(pg: 17)

Pi Patel knows how and when to assert his identity. Francis Adirubasamy, his father’s earliest business contacts and a good friend of family kept his name as Pi. He called Francis, mamaji. He was a champion competitive swimmer, the champion of all South India. Failed to teach Pi’s parents and brother Ravi swimming, he caught hold of Pi when he was seven. Pi was named after a swimming pool, Piscine Molitor.

“It was a pool the gods would have delighted to swim in....The water was so clean and clear you could have used to make your morning coffee”

Piscine was often pronounced as pissing by his batch mates and teachers. He asked everyone to call him Pi by underlining the first two letters of his name; he repeated the same in every lecture as he considered that “repetition is important in training not only of animals but also of humans.” (pg: 23)

Next we come to know about Pi’s views on religion. He says:-

“It is not atheists who get struck in my craw, but agnostics. Doubt is useful for a while....Chose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation.” (pg:28)

Mr. Kumar is Pi’s atheist teacher and science is his religion. He believes in science and Pi appreciates that he is not in any doubt. Science and religion goes hand in hand in the novel. There is another Mr. Kumar, he is a Muslim, and because of his influence Pi started to follow Islam. Pi was a Hindu from birth but he followed Islam and Christianity as well. Pi’s believe in God is very strong and it remains the same till the end of his journey. There is a fictional writer in this novel who visits Pi’s home after his escape from the shipwreck. The writer has given a description of his house.

‘His house is a temple. In the entrance hall hangs a framed picture of Ganesha....He is the lord overcomer of obstacles, the God of good luck, the God of Wisdom, the patron of learning....In the living room...is a small framed picture of the Virgin Mary of Gaudalupe....Next to it is a framed photo of the black robed Kaaba, holiest sanctum of Islam.’, ‘Shrine in the kitchen’, ‘On the television set is a brass statue of Shiva as Nataraja, the cosmic lord of dance.’. (pg:45)

This in itself shows his believe in various religions.

Application of science is witnessed when Pi creates his own boundary and he trains Richard Parker by repeating the whistle sound and changing the direction of boat which causes him sea sickness. Pi Patel was out of the zoo enclosure and as an animal in wild he has to be aware of each and every step he takes. Yann Martel has used here an interesting technique, he uses logic so that a reader believes that a man has survived with the tiger, yes it is fictional, but while reading the novel there is an image created and it appears to be real. This is the magic of Martel's words and vocabulary. He also mentions in between the novel many times his philosophy of life. The protagonist can also be taken as Martel's own representation. Some of his lines raises the readers interest and are very close to reality, one can relate to his/her own circumstances.

"Misery loves company, and madness calls it forth." (pg:242)

Martel has written beautifully. There were many elements of his survival but fear had the most important part in it. It was because of Richard Parker that Pi survived.

"It was Richard Parker who calmed me down. 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." (pg:162)

"If I still had the will to live, it was thanks to Richard Parker. He kept me from thinking too much about my family and my tragic circumstances. He pushed me to go on living. I hated him for it, yet at the same time I was grateful. I *am* grateful. It's the plain truth: without Richard Parker, I wouldn't be alive today to tell you my story." (pg:164)

The instinct of survival can make a man do anything in his life. He can go to the extent of eating up a human being. There remains no difference between an animal and a human when it comes to survival. Survival of the fittest, this is the law of nature. First time it was hard for Pi to kill a fish, he thanked Lord Vishnu to come in the form of fish to save his life, but after one fish or two, it was Pi's daily routine, to fetch something for himself and for Richard Parker. He kills various turtles to train Richard and uses his urine to mark his own territory. There remains no difference between him and the animal in the lifeboat. His humanity lowers by the end of his story. Hope was the other important thing which kept him alive but towards the end we see it fading. The French man was a great relief to him, he found some human company, someone to listen to and talk to after so long a time. The Pacific Ocean turned both of them blind in fact the tiger also. The Frenchman had no good purpose. Pi was food to him and he was about to kill him when Richard Parker attacked the Frenchman in order to save Pi's life. Pi further used his flesh for the bait, he was really guilty of what he did and he tells the writer that till this time he prays for his soul.

Pi also visits a carnivorous island. Reader is not sure that this was a real incident or just a hallucination. But whatever this was it quiet strengthened both Pi and Parker for the further journey. They reached Mexico where Parker faded away in the jungle without a gesture of goodbye to Parker. This thing hurts Pi the most till date. He was rescued and brought to the hospital.

There is another marvellous turn where the writer leaves the reader to decide which of the two stories was true. The one with animals or the other he told to the Japanese officials. Tomohiro Okamoto from the Maritime Department in the Japanese Ministry of Transport with his assistant Atsuro Chiba interviewed Pi about the sinking of the ship. He told them the story of his survival of 227 days in Pacific Ocean in a lifeboat with the tiger. They did not believe the story and thought that it was a fiction. He then told them another story of the cook, the sailor, Pi's mother and himself on a lifeboat. Sailor broke his leg, cook killed the sailor and then his mother and then Pi killed the cook. "Solitude began. I turned to God. I survived." It was a horrible story for them. He tells us that he has made up both the stories to overcome the tragic incidents. Martel has drawn out the similarity between humans and animals. The sailor represent the zebra that broke his leg, the cook represents the greedy, courageous Hyena, Orang-utan, the motherly figure, represents Pi's own mother and Pi represents the courageous and bold Richard Parker.

This novel brings out the other part of human beings in front which we do not accept generally. After reading this novel, scholar is sure that readers have changed the views towards the end of the novel. Their belief in God is aroused and they are forced to choose between being an atheist or the believer in God. The scholar is sure that after reading this the readers will choose zoo for animals rather than wildlife.