



Negotiating the Postmodern Narrative Techniques in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to analyse the complex and ambiguous phenomenon of the very movement of postmodernism in Yann Martel's distinguished novel *Life of Pi*. Owing to the techniques and strategies employed in this novel, it can be called the true representative of postmodern fiction. As it breaks with realism and avoids rigid genre distinction, postmodernism deconstructs the wholeness and completeness associated with conventional storytelling ways. There is use of postmodern narrative as the novel is highly self-reflexive and Martel also experiments with intertextuality and historiographic metafiction. He weaves this novel with extraordinary and unusual events. By blending facts and fiction, he makes space for the readers for different interpretations. The contours of postmodern techniques such as fragmentation, metafiction, multiple points of view, advocacy of plurality of histories, and sheer rejection of grand narratives are used in this novel. Out here Martel delineates the chaotic condition of the postmodern world through *Life of Pi*.

Keywords: Postmodern Narrative, Historiographic Metafiction, Intertextuality, Fragmentation.

Introduction

Being a postmodernist fiction, *Life of Pi* deals with the story of the character Pi Patel holding on to life as a castaway in the Pacific Ocean for 227 days. The construction of a fictional world and in that devised world too, the real and the other world is the unique strategy implied by Martel. Being a postmodern writer, Martel introduces and practices various unique tools to impart uniqueness to fiction. According to Jean Francois Lyotard, postmodern writers are not restricted to adhering to any conventional rules and their works cannot be judged by "applying familiar categories to the text or the work of art" (81). Even though the name of Pi as Piscine Molitor Patel is named after a swimming pool in France; the conversion of the protagonist's name from Piscine to Pi has symbolic meanings. At the surface level, he tends to avoid his schoolmates' teasing of the similitude between "Piscine" and "pissing." Pi also corresponds to

a mathematical symbol with the value 3.14 or 22/7, and it also hints at the period for his ordeal lasts i.e. 227 days.

The very postmodern technique of multiple points of view has been implied here. The novel is divided into three parts with a total of a hundred chapters. Part one is entitled 'Toronto and Pondicherry' which depicts the protagonist Piscine, known as Pi, who is living in Canada. The story then moves back in time to Pi's childhood in Pondicherry in India, where he lived with his family at their zoo. Martel narrates this part. In part two, 'The Pacific Ocean' Pi is lonesome and out of things in a lifeboat and he has to ally himself with a zebra, a hyena, an orang-utan, and a Bengal tiger named 'Richard Parker'. The ordeal of Pi's experiences on the lifeboat with the tiger is narrated by himself providing the first-person narrative. Pi retells and recreates the story told by Mr. Adirubasamy by recollecting his childhood days, his family's decision to move to Canada, his battleship, and his enduring hardships in the Pacific Ocean. Part three, 'Benito Juárez Infirmary, Tomatlán Mexico' is situated in Mexico. It is a short dialogue between Pi and two Japanese men. After telling about his trials and tribulations in the Ocean where he co-existed along with the tiger, Richard Parker, Pi is asked by the Japanese officers to tell another story. The story is narrated by four perspectives of the four narrators; Mr. Adirubasamy, Mr. Patel-Pi, a grown-up, and Piscine Molitor Patel-Pi. Martel assumes the role of a storyteller; the chapters that appear italicized are narrated by himself. It is quite difficult to locate the beginning, middle, and ending of the story. Through multiplicity, postmodernism suggests that there are multiple truths instead of one dominant truth and that there is no universal truth in the world. Furthermore, these truths change over time, that's why Lyotard defines 'postmodernism' as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). Being a postmodernist, Martel debunks the conventional binaries between fact and fiction. There is the depiction of 'discontinuity' (Foucault) and 'de-totalization' (Linda Hutcheon) in the narrative technique. The multiplicity of the truths has been depicted by the use of story within a story technique. The characters narrate a story to entertain the other characters in the novel. The story narrated in the novel has symbolic and psychological implications along with the themes exemplified throughout the novel. In the authorial comment, Pi recounts his country visit that is to India to write a novel, going to the Indian Coffee House in Pondicherry; listening to the story of server Mr. Adirubasamy who tells in a compelling manner that can transform an atheist into a theist. After considering Mr. Adirubasamy as an inspiration for the story of Mr. Patel, Mr. Adirubasamy assumes the role of a narrator and Martel the role of his record-keeper. Martel writes ". . . it seemed natural that Mr. Patel's story should be told mostly in the first person—in his voice and through his eyes. But any inaccuracies and mistakes are mine" (Martel xiii-

xiv). The Japanese official, Mr. Tomohiro Okamoto, represents the modernist streak of thought by emphasizing scientific principles and privileging reason over imagination. The contrast between modernism and postmodernism has been presented here through the characters of Pi and Okamoto. This is why the official from the Japanese Ministry of Transport suspects Pi's account of his 227-day-long tribulation in the lifeboat under the nose of an Indian tiger. From his perspective, why would a starved tiger spare the life of a human being and an orang-utan can't possibly float up to the lifeboat on a raft of bananas? Mr. Okamoto endorses objective truth and science and says, "Reason is the very best tool kit" (298). But Pi contradicts his views and challenges his perspectives. He in the postmodernist sense adheres to the importance of mini-narratives and gives importance to "the telling of something [which] always become[s] a story" (302). Pi rejects transcendental reason by maintaining the fact that storytelling is something of an invention. Pi is quite doubtful about the objectivity of truth. He resorts to postmodern aversion to totality when he emphasizes the word, "invention" (302).

In the first version of the story, Martel provides the details of the food chain indicated by the hyena which eats the zebra first, and then an orang-utan, then itself becomes the tiger prey, and after that Pi gives the rat to the tiger to protect himself. The second version of the story is very concise and abrupt as compared to the first version and it is in the conversational form between Pi and two Japanese officers. It also illustrates metafictional aspects such as Martel himself making comments on this story and calling it unreal and fictional, the characters Mr. Chiba and Mr. Okamoto are skeptical of the story and urging the narrator to make alterations to it and the narrator directly addresses the readers here. McHale maintains that in postmodernist fiction one event can be narrated and then it can be un-narrated, evaded, and suppressed even it can be reinstated and anticipated with another event along with some other details and explanations (103). In his second story, he replaces human characters with animals as in a Cook instead of a hyena, his mother instead of an orang-utan, a Sailor instead of a zebra, and he substitutes himself for Richard Parker. Owing to it Pi Patel starts narrating the second story: "You want a story without animals" (303) . . . "Here is another story" (303) . . . Mr. Chiba: "What a horrible story" (311) . . . Mr. Okamoto: "We give up. The explanation for the Sinking of the *Tsimtsum* is at the bottom of the Pacific" (Martel 316).

While emphasizing the technique of multiple truths and mini-narratives, Martel has also practiced the tool of pastiche as he was influenced by Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Joyce's *Ulysses*. Pastiche is an imitation of the style by combining, incorporating, and pasting together multiple elements to replenish a fresh stance in the existing piece of work. Ingeborg Hoesterey

claims pastiche to be "... hodge-podge" (493). In the literary arena, it denotes a merging, mixing, and patching up of various elements; words, sentences, images, style, manner, ideas, etcetra from different sources. *Life of Pi* in this sense has parallels with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Then there are diary entries about his daily events which are maintained daily by Pi and are based on R.K. Narayan's writing style. Pastiche always introduced the example of 'intertextuality' which is one of the postmodern techniques. The term intertextuality is derived from the Latin word '*intertexto*' meaning to intermingle. The borrowing of text from other work and incorporating it into the present work is called intertextuality. Julia Kristeva coined and propounded the term, 'intertextuality' in 1966. She also claimed that "a literary text is not an isolated phenomenon but is made up of a mosaic of quotations, and that any text is the 'absorption and transformation of another'" (Cuddon 424). Pi's mother counsels him to read the works of Robert Louis Stevenson, Conan Doyle, R.K. Narayan, and Daniel Defoe whenever he troubles her. The intertextuality which is again a vital element of postmodernism has been hinted at throughout the context of the story by the references to Robert Louis Stevenson, Conan Doyle, R.K. Narayan, Daniel Defoe, and Dante as Barry maintains that "...things cannot be understood in isolation" (38). The Pacific Ocean where Pi spent 227 days can be interpreted as Purgatory or the Inferno in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Intertextual references and allusions to different religious books such as the Bible, and the Quran, are evident throughout the novel. The notion of postmodern intertextuality is a strategy of providing various dimensions to the story as well as providing numerous interpretations of the religious texts. The text's relatedness to other texts and the complex relation of history and fiction has been aptly defined by Vincent Leitch as:

Intertextuality posits both an uncentered historical enclosure and an abysmal decentered foundation for language and textuality; in so doing, it exposes all contextualizations as limited and limiting, arbitrary and confining, self-serving and authoritarian, theological and political. However paradoxically formulated, intertextuality offers a liberating determinism. (Qtd. in *Poetics* 127)

Pi's spiritual journey is strengthened by stories from a different religion. Each religion has its own set of stories which makes him believe in God. Hutcheon defines postmodern paradox as "[t]o parody is not to destroy the past; in fact, to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it." (*Poetics* 126). Even the name of the ship, *Tsimtsum* has a connection with religious texts. He is even forced to act against his religious faith to give up his vegetarianism but all religions have stories that make them believe in God and he regains his mental acumen and physical strength. Pi says, "The presence of God is the finest of rewards" (63). Pi's

unconventional religious philosophy is also postmodernist which subverts absolute reality in a very typical and shrewd manner. By decentralizing the religious perspectives, Martel seems to challenge the notion of religion as the central force propounded by Samuel P. Huntington in “The Clash of Civilizations?” According to Huntington, “The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, . . . They will not soon disappear [as] they are far more fundamental than differences among political ideologies and political regimes” (25). The postmodernist curve is perceptible when Pi says that “this [Christianity] religion had more than one story in its bag – religions abound with stories” (53).

Then there are stories of the Hindu religion where “[the] gods of Hinduism face their share of thieves, bullies, kidnapers and usurpers. What is the Ramayana but the account of one long, bad day for Rama? Adversity, yes. Reversals of fortune, yes. Treachery, yes. . . . There is the story of baby Krishna, wrongly accused by his friends of eating a bit of dirt. His foster mother, Yashoda, comes up to him with a wagging finger. . . . There is the story of Vishnu incarnated as Vamana the dwarf. . . . Even Rama, that most human of avatars, who had to be reminded of his divinity when he grew long-faced over the struggle to get Sita, his wife, back from Ravana, evil king of Lanka, was no slouch. . . . That is God as God should be” (54-55). The all-embracing feature of postmodernist fiction has been deployed here through the recognition and glorification of the three religions in Pi’s survival.

Furthermore, the distinction between real and unreal is inextricably intertwined whereby the acuteness has been accentuated by the use of metafiction which is in itself fiction about the fiction. Then, metafiction paves the way to Historiographic metafiction; a technique in postmodern fiction that combines metafiction with historical fiction. Linda Hutcheon argues while coining the term ‘historiographic metafiction’ that it fictionalizes and re-presents factual historical incidents and personas. Linda Hutcheon holds the view that historical facts and fiction construct realities through discursive practices by being blended. Both are not fixed and stabilized but they are continuously in the process of constructing and recasting each other. Hutcheon puts forth that one of the tenets of historiographic metafiction is that past events can be known through their “discursive inscription” and “traces in the present” (97). It makes it possible to situate a real historical personage in a fictional world. Historical events are slightly mentioned but become a substantial part of the novel. The reference to the era of Mrs. Gandhi in India, the state of emergency in 1975, and the following facts are co-related with the precarious voyage of the Pi family. Martel deliberately blends the present with the past, not only in the narrative but also in combining famous people of history just in a single frame. The historical context of the novel has been substantiated by mentioning the various Indian places

with authentic historical and geographical particulars. The floating island of algae in chapter 92 imparts fictionality to the novel which is undoubtedly a unique postmodern element. Then there is the depiction of a talking tiger which is in itself an incredible scenario that hints at the rejection of hierarchies. Pi holds a good conversation with the “bedraggled” (263) tiger, he asks about the food from the tiger. The tiger plays an important role in Pi’s adventure. As he reflects, “. . . 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” (162). Then the use of the retrospective narrative technique is very crucial here, Pi gives an account of the things that happened during his salad days. His family’s relocation from India to Winnipeg; and his father’s plan to collect some zoo animals and bring them to Canada, every detail has been presented through the flashback.

The construction of fictional elements within the fictional world is very fascinating in the novel. Metafiction, a literary device, draws attention to the link between fiction and reality in a self-conscious manner. The conversation or discussion about food is something real but having such a conversation with a tiger is merely fictional as in “We’ve made it! We’re saved! Do you understand, Richard Parker? WE’RE SAVED! Ha, ha, ha, ha!” (234). It is a common thing to see animals in the zoo but here in this novel, Martel creates a true postmodern world where everything is possible and everything is celebrated, by giving voice to the tiger, which is being tamed and trained that too in a lifeboat on the ocean, he endorses the concept of mini-narratives. This story can be considered as an allegory; human suffering is symbolized by the zebra and tiger when they are tussling for survival and “[t]he zebra was still alive . . . [and] it continued to pump with life. . . . Movement was confined to a tremor in the rear leg and an occasional blinking of the eyes. I had no idea [how] a living being could sustain so much injury and go on living” (Martel 128). Even though the zebra is injured, there is hope and struggle to live alive on its part which also corresponds to the human tendency to grapple bravely the testing times like Pi struggling in the lifeboat. Thus, the zebra becomes the embodiment of human suffering and existence. Then there is the hyena that too is surrounded by death but the killing instinct is intact in it and it still kills the zebra and orang-utan as “[the] hyena . . . knows what it wants and how to get it” (Martel 130). Such instances in one way or another depict the existential crisis that human beings are going through and making their way to overcome that crisis without any rue.

The various twists and turns of the story are described through the use of memory where Pi jumps forward and backward in his narration which emphasizes temporal distortion. Pi accepts the fact that his story does not follow a chronological pattern. Pi says, “Time is an illusion that

only makes us pant. I survived because I forgot even the very notion of time. . . . My memories come in a jumble” (Martel 192). There is the use of fragmentation in the story. Temporal distortion is a common postmodern technique that refers to the fact that one cannot remain stuck to a unipolar behaviour and point of view in this literary movement of postmodernism as it represents the time-based distinction that is always slippery and temporal. Martel here disrupts the time sequence by providing various super-imposed and contradictory situations and by the use of fragmentation. McHale states that in postmodernist fiction there is a kind of “ambiguity” and “indeterminacy” where one condition can be projected and recalled and then it can also be unprojected (99). Pi tells the story through his memory which is “events and encounters and routines, markers that emerged here and there from the ocean of time...” (Martel 192). While highlighting the key characteristics of postmodern fiction Tim Woods defines that postmodern fiction shows, “narrative fragmentation and narrative reflexivity; narratives which double back on their own presuppositions; an open-ended play with formal devices and narration artifice, in which narrative self-consciously alludes to its own artifice, thus challenging some of the pre-supposition of literary realism; an interrogation of the ontological bases of and connections between narrative and subjectivity” (82). Multiple narratives are taking over the place of a single narrative, no fixed meaning is attributed to a single narrative. There is nothing absolute, nothing marginalized, and the only center of consciousness and attention has been demystified. The meanings and interpretations are fluid, and factuality, as well as fictionality, are intertwined throughout the narrative process which renders the contingent rubric of the very movement of postmodernism.

Conclusion

In the summative remarks, it can be said that the novel is anti-conventional in style and loaded with multiple interpretations. There are in-built themes and imagination that destabilize the real meaning and present a distorted version of the real. There is a shift from the abstract to material imagination in the very postmodern context. By conflating fact and fiction, *Life of Pi* challenges and engages the reader as it vehemently rejects the single consciousness. The conventional manner of delineating reality has been repudiated here to consider the reality and facts that have evolved from an individual’s interpretations. Like postmodernist novels in general it focuses on plurality as well as it has an open ending and gives the reader the authority to accept any of the conclusions as it caters to different perspectives of the story. Every postmodernist technique namely, narrative technique, parody, pastiche, temporal distortion, mini-narratives, historiographic metafiction, and intertextuality contributes to complementing the themes of the novel.

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