

A Study of Grief in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

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Abstract:

Yann Martel, a writer in Canadian literature, is known for his novel, *Life of Pi*. He was given the Man Booker Prize for the novel. *The Life of Pi* was brought out on September 11, 2001. Many concepts, such as perceptions, emotions, motivation, personality, and behaviors, are well depicted by the author. It is the story of a boy from his childhood. He was called Pi. He was in the ocean for 227 days with wild animals. Pi's family was in Pondicherry, and they owned a zoo. They shifted to Canada due to the political issues there. They travelled in a Japanese cargo with some animals. In the middle of sailing, there was a shipwreck, and the only human in the lifeboat was Pi, with a Bengal tiger and some more animals. Grief is divided into many stages in the novel. Anger is a part of grief. Pi's anger is seen from his childhood. He gets angry when his name is misspelled, when he asks to follow one religion, and he gets angry at Richard Parker, the Bengal tiger, while sharing the lifeboat. Bargaining is a part where Pi bargains with God for his life. Pi is filled with depression to feed the tiger and form a territory for the tiger to live in the lifeboat. After the separation of Richard Parker, Pi feels the isolation and denial of the latter. Pi accepts whatever life has to offer and he overcomes all the grief of his survival. Pi enters the grief cycle and reforms himself in such a situation.

Keywords: Grief, anger, bargaining, depression, isolation, acceptance

In 1963, Yann Martel was born in Spain and his parents, who were Canadian, were part of the diplomatic corps. Through his parents' work, he has experienced and adopted many cultures. This is well seen in his writings. He tried various jobs, but only his writing skills gave him hope. Martel has written many books, including short stories. Martel travels to gain inspiration. While travelling to India in 1999, he was reading Moacyr Scilar's *Max and Cat*, and that inspired him to write the most famous story, *Life of Pi* (2001).

Martel's *novel* is an adventure story about a boy, Piscine Molitor Patel, also known as Pi. His father is a zoo keeper in Pondicherry. Pi recounts his experience in several unusual situations. The paper is a brief study of grief in Martel's novel, *Life of Pi*. There are five stages of grief, which were created by the Swiss-American psychiatrist, Elisabeth Kubler Ross. She first applied it in her book on *Death and Dying*. Kubler later realised that the stages were inflexible. She thought that the theory of the stages would be misunderstood.

Kubler-Ross, framed the five stages of grief as: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Five stages are known by the acronym DABDA. These stages are not only the description of one's own death but also include friends and family. Kubler's model may include any type of personal loss, such as the death of a fetus, the loss of a career or income, major rejection, the end of a relationship or divorce, drug addiction, incarceration, the single set of a disease or impotence diagnosis, and even small losses such as insurance coverage.

The novel *Life of Pi* is viewed through the lens of bereavement. The first stage of grief is

denial. Denial is the first of the five stages. In this, the individual finds the most common defence mechanism. It occurs just before or after the loss. These characteristics include fear, shock, or emotional numbness. During this stage, the person may not acknowledge or talk about the loss with others. It is a temporary response to the pain that has started. In this way, the world becomes meaningless and overwhelmed. In the *Life of Pi*, this stage is seen when Pi loses his family in the shipwreck. Pi and his family members, with animals from the zoo, board the *Tsimtsum*, a ship that is moving to Canada. The family planned to sell the animals and gain money, and they wanted to start a new life in Canada.

A massive storm threatens the ship while sailing to Canada in the middle of the ocean. Pi was the one who was woken during the storm, and he moved to the deck to see what was happening. The fear is felt by Pi, and he approaches the crew members for help. He wants to help his family and also wants them to advise him on what to do next. The crew members put him into the lifeboat, with the lifejacket. Pi sees the animals drowning in the sea, and he rescues Richard Parker, the Bengal tiger, even though he knows that it is a kind of suicide. From the lifeboat, he sees the ship sinking in the sea, but he doesn't know the reason for the disaster.

The readers could feel the tension building in the novel. Martel slows down the story telling, by describing the events of the ship's sinking. When Pi sees Richard Parker in the water sinking, he cries that it must be a dream. The next day, after the shipwreck, he finds a badly injured zebra, a wounded hyena, and an Orangutan a large monkey. The hyena in seduction kills the zebra, and then goes to the Orangutan where it can't fight back. Richard Parker then eats the hyena. Now Pi and the tiger are found in the lifeboat.

Isolation from danger has a major effect on loneliness. Lonely people always put their efforts aside and don't care about their survival. Pi is not able to show fear of the tiger. Pi manages to conquer the tiger with his language. He also plans to train Richard Parker, and his plans to survive with the tiger show humanity and self-respect. He possesses two potentials that will never allow him to fail: first, he must forget that he is a person, and second, he must forget that the tiger is a wild animal. That will create an affection for and ability to save the tiger.

The story is narrated in the first person, and that makes the reader aware of the Pi's own vision and the reality of what happens. Pi assigns human feelings and actions to objects such as *Tsimtsum*, the water, and the lifeboat. Pi also constructs a conversation between his own fear and reason. Pi and Richard Parker survived together for 227 days. Pi starts finding the things in the lifeboat and starts using them. He finds out that thirst is the most essential thing for him and the tiger. He satisfies his thirst and also feeds him to make him calm. Though he is a devoted vegetarian in this situation, he modifies himself as a hunter and carnivore.

Humans assume that animals exist to serve them. But when control is not fully mastered, the animal is confined within the space to give the image of control, as in cages of zoos or wildlife in forests. After three days of sedation, Richard Parker finds food for himself and eats the meat of hyenas and zebras. Soon after the meat is being taken, it looks into the eyes of Pi and communication begins, Richard Parker is in seduction by the drug, and he couldn't see properly, but the eyes of the tiger were ready to see an image, Pi says that he looks like meat to him. In

fear, the hairs of Pi are upward in the sky. No words are being sheered, but eyes communicate a lot.

Pi never thinks of his family and he doesn't acknowledge the loss, but he is ready to survive with the tiger. The understanding Pi understands of God causes him to consider how his life has been altered as a result of the overwhelming external forces of nature, such as the sea, storm, and tiger. Being with the tiger in the lifeboat makes him think scientifically and not emotionally. Using his knowledge of the psychology and physiology of the animals, Pi finds that Richard Parker is seasick and utilises the situation to take control of the tiger. The death of a loved one makes people angry at their lack of taking proper precautions. And they also blame themselves for the loss. Finally, they may accept the death and appreciate the time they had with the loved one.

The second stage is anger. Anger is an intense emotion that deflects from the core. It may last for days, weeks, months, or longer. Anger can be expressed towards inanimate objects, outsiders, friends, or even close ones. An angry person will feel agitation and frustration that can manifest in different ways, such as crying, feeling weak, doing useless tasks, and feeling isolated. Pi expresses anger in the book. He expresses his anger in childhood, at school, when his classmates mispronounce his name, and in anger, he discovers a solution to the mispronunciation.

As his name is named after his Mamaji's favourite pool, Piscine Molitor in Paris, which has an unusual name. And it is being pronounced as 'pissing.' He was bullied in school. Pi cleverly shortens his name to Pi and remembers as many numbers as he can in a mathematical constant. And from then on, he started referring to himself as Pi in each school class by writing his name Pi with the mathematical numbers on the blackboard. Pi's frustration makes him think of a way to overcome the anger.

Pi practises three religions: Hindu, Christian, and Muslim. The atmosphere at home is created by an atheist-rationalist father and a faithful Hindu mother who always tells him the story of Vishnu and Krishna. Later, he learns about Jesus from a church father in Munnar, and he wants to be Christian. After hearing about Jesus, who died for the sins of others, he wants to follow Christ. When he comes to know about the dedication of Mr. Kumar, the Muslim baker, he wants to become Muslim. While following all the three rituals, he was teased by his brother, and he was asked to choose one by his parents and teachers. Later, he understands that God is one, and in all religions, loving is the aim of religion. Anger gives him the confidence of knowing God and being ideal in his idea of worship.

Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba, the police investigators, question Pi about why and how the ship sinks, and when Pi begins narrating the true story, they are unable to accept what has occurred. The story is hard to believe, and they ask him to narrate another story. This insults Pi, and he makes up a new story by changing the animals into human characters. They were ready to accept the existence of human beings rather than animals. Pi asks the investigators whether the story changes made any difference. The investigator says that the story is good and acceptable. But now Pi gets angry and thinks how people are living in fantasy because they cannot believe that a man living with animals is not acceptable and people living with people in a lifeboat for 227 days is acceptable. Pi also thinks that though the animal is inferior to humans, that made him

survive in the lifeboat.

The third stage is bargaining in grief. A person tries to find meaning in the loss and reaches out to others to discuss it. Pi's faith makes him perceive a connection with Richard Parker by accepting him as a survival mate. Pi's positive vibe continues the journey for 227 days in the Pacific Ocean. Pi struggles throughout the novel with nature and Richard Parker, but does not give up hope. He shows his hearing of the inner voice that helps him cope with the adversity he faces after the shipwreck. He hears an inner voice and it is given by Pi.

Pi would have died. He is giving up his life, and he hears the inner voice saying that I will not die. It is his own words, a hope that he will live. These words are heard in a dream while sleeping. Even though he didn't go for a deep sleep in fear and shock, he could dream and he still remembers the words. He is ready to overcome the danger, which is true, as a dream and push it out. The odd thing is that the entire human population on the ship is dead, and God has some other plan for Pi. He wants to survive, and he will experience the miracle of nature. As God is everywhere, he says that God is with him and he will not die till he is with God. Pi demonstrates that his will and skills, gained through continuous struggle, give him a positive outlook on dealing with problems rather than repenting of his circumstances and fighting with God for survival.

The fourth stage of grieving is depression. Depression comes in waves. People will feel overwhelmed and experience extreme sadness. They become hostile towards others. Pi's expression in deep words, Pi is surrounded by water on all sides, he was alone. Even tears roll down the eyes. He is tied and only his hand will wipe the tears. Trying to survive is hopeless for him. The protagonist lost his parents and his siblings in the shipwreck. After getting into the lifeboat, some animals such as zebras, orangutans, hyenas, and Bengal tigers were with him. Fear of death engulfed Pi, and he was dealing with hopelessness.

Pi realises that he must depend on the animals for his survival, and that he cannot depend on anyone else. He very well knows that he is the mouth of fear, and he sleeps in the lifeboat because that is where he hopes to live. He could see the sky, which was changing its colour. The air is fresh and filled with light. When he looks around the sea, it is like a great book filled with things. In the night, he could see the things under the sea, and the sky was filled with stars. When he was admiring the nature of the night, suddenly the day came. He could feel the warmth of the sun when the sun looked like an electrical orange light. The rays of the sun give him hope to see things in light and colour. It was like a song that he could hear from his heart. In Pi, the protagonist goes into a deep depression, which he overcomes by sleeping in the Pacific Ocean. The sunrays make him feel alive and enthusiastic. Pi struggles against his internal and external forces to survive with positivity.

The final stage of grief is acceptance. It occurs with the terms of the loss. They start moving, which is not preoccupied with the loss. Everyone goes through different stages of grief. The risk is about human development that illuminates the cause, mechanism and consequences of behavioral change in life. Christopher J. Mruk says about the positive psychology as:

Psychology is not just about illness or health; it is also building what is virtue. Treatment is not just about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play. And in this quest for what is best, positive psychology...tries to adapt that is best in the scientific method to the unique problem that human behavior present in all its complexity. (234)

Pi's internal cognitive factors, the external contextual factors and the action that makes him

perform.

After moving along with all the grief stages, the person comes to casual life. They accept the loss and return to normal. After 227 days in the ocean, the boat hits an island. He finds that the island is filled with meerkats, algae, and trees. Richard Parker becomes enraged and begins running inside the island without being acknowledged;

He only looked fixedly into the jungle. Then Richard Parker, companion of my torment, awful, fierce thing that kept me alive, moved forward and disappeared forever from my life. (284-285)

Pi is rescued by the people later, and he is hospitalised and returns to normal life. Pi is a character who suddenly loses his family and leads a life with a tiger. Later, he is betrayed by the tiger and goes back to a normal life in Mexico. Thus, he undergoes all the stages of grief and becomes normal.

Work Cited

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