



EGOCENTRISM TO ECOCENTRISM: AN EXPEDITION TO YANN MARTEL'S LIFE OF PI

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Abstract- The ecological concerns reflected in the novel, *Life of Pi*, by Yann Martel, draw attention to man's domineering and conquering attitude towards the environment and its species and to become conscious that nature is not to be seen as a commodity for man's self-centeredness and selfish motives. The oneness that Pi experiences with nature gives rise to a deep appreciation of the reality of interdependence, and from this comes the urge to be involved in opposing all sorts of ecological abuses. From the deep ecological and Buddhist perspectives on ecology, awareness arises in the individual towards a sense of belonging, of connectedness, to the universe as a whole. The eco-critical analysis of the text on this basis, results in a change in perception of humanity regarding environmental relationships, to a more peaceful order.

Keywords: Buddhist philosophy, Deep ecology, Ecocentrism, Egocentrism, Self-Actualization.

I. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of the central character Pi, from the state of egocentrism to the state of ecocentrism is portrayed in the novel. Despite Pi's love for animals and his notion that the zoo is a comfort zone for animals, the fact remains that the prior reason behind the enclosure of animals in the zoo is for the entertainment of human beings. Pi could not find fault in the zoo business and he justifies his father's building of the zoo as a good deed, as the zoo shelters the animals from the dangers of the wilderness and ensures food and water supply and care from other predators:

Animals in the wild lead lives of compulsion and necessity within an unforgiving social hierarchy in an environment where the supply of fear is high and the supply of food low and where territory must constantly be defended and parasites forever endured...Animals are territorial. That is the key to their minds. Only a familiar territory will allow them to fulfill the two relentless imperatives of the wild: the avoidance of enemies and the getting of food and water. A biologically sound zoo enclosure-whether cage, pit, moated island, corral, terrarium, aviary, or aquarium-is just another territory, peculiar only in its size and in its proximity to human territory. (16-17)

But despite all these, the zoo can be only stated as an assurance of earning huge profit and an amusement destination to attract visitors daily, which is, in turn, the manifestation of anthropocentrism and the self-centered attitude of human beings.

The justification made by Pi, regarding his father's zoo business can be analyzed using Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which states egocentrism as the inability of a man to think and view from the perspective of others. The justification regarding the zoo business is based only on the well-being of human beings, not of the animals. Pi says that the denial of freedom for the wild animals compared to the food and shelter provided for them in the zoo is nothing:

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. A house is a compressed territory where our basic needs can be fulfilled close by and safely... A sound zoo enclosure is an equivalent for an animal. Finding within it all the places it needs-a lookout, a place for resting, for eating and drinking, for bathing, for grooming, etc.-and finding that there is no need to go hunting, food appearing six days a week, an animal will take possession of its zoo space in the same way it would lay claim to a new space in the wild. (17)

By no means can one agree that providing food and shelter to the zoo animals is greater than the denial of freedom and enclosing the wild animals to a smaller space. It is clear that Pi and his family are not doing this out of their charitable mind but only for their benefit and profit. It indicates the domination of man over the other species. Even when provided with all facilities the animals are disturbed at the small alterations they undergo:

In a zoo, if an animal is not in its normal place in its regular posture at the usual hour, it means something. It may be the reflection of nothing more than a minor change in the environment. A coiled hose left out by a keeper has made a menacing impression. A puddle has formed that bothers the animal. A ladder is making a shadow. But it could mean something more. At its worst, it could be that most dreaded thing to a zoo director: a symptom, a herald of trouble to come, a reason to inspect the dung, to cross-examine the keeper, to summon the vet. All this because a stork is not standing where it usually stands! (17)

When Pi says, "In a zoo, we do for animals what we have done for ourselves with houses" (18), it is also the expression of the utilitarian attitude of man. The houses are built for the comfort of man and the same attitude is reflected by his family, in running the zoo. There is no justification in the notion of Pi when he says that the forest is not a suitable place to reside for wild animals as they have to face many dangers and hence, the zoo is the better place to reside. The life in the forest that the wild animal's experience is part of the normal lifecycle of nature and there is nothing wrong with it. The notion of the zoo is the one that works against the normal life cycle of nature. In the zoo, Pi's father admits that the most dangerous animals are human beings:

Just beyond the ticket booth Father had painted on a wall in bright red letters the question: DO YOU KNOW WHICH IS THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL IN THE ZOO? An arrow pointed to a small curtain. There were so many eager, curious hands that pulled at the curtain that we had to replace it regularly. Behind it was a mirror. (31)

The author draws attention to instances of egocentrism in these people, whose only concern is their own selfish needs and exploitation of nature and other life forms. The indifferent attitude of human beings is portrayed in the details given by the protagonist Pi, about the people who come to visit the zoo and mercilessly leave behind toxic and harmful materials that endanger animals:

We commonly say in the trade that the most dangerous animal in a zoo is Man. In a general way, we mean how our species' excessive predator nets have made the entire planet our prey. More specifically, we have in mind the people who feed fishhooks to the otters, razors to the bears, apples with small nails in them to the elephants...The obituary of zoo animals that have died from being fed foreign bodies would include gorillas, bison, storks, rheas, ostriches, seals, sea lions, big cats, bears, camels, elephants, monkeys, and almost every variety of deer, ruminant, and songbird. (29)

To create fear towards the ferociousness of wild animals and a feeling of disconnect in the attitude towards them, Pi's father makes the eight-year-old Pi witness one of the zoo tigers hungrily attacking and killing a live goat. Through this instruction, the message conveyed by Pi's father, describes man's disconnect with nature: "There are animals we haven't stopped by. Don't think they're harmless. Life will defend itself no matter how small it is. Every animal is ferocious and dangerous. It may not kill you, but it will certainly injure you..." (38), the lesson taught by the father estranges the children from nonhuman life to a state of selfishness and to be concerned with only their safety. This picture implanted in the childhood memories of Pi, created in him negative impressions of the ways of animals. This impression influences Pi's approach towards animals in the initial days of shipwreck, when he is confined to the company of animals, in the lifeboat.

Outraged by the imposition of emergency by Indira Gandhi, Pi's parents decide to migrate to Canada. Along with the rare species of the zoo, the ship *Tsimstram* starts the voyage. It needs to be noted that Pi's family took the risk and pain of transporting the wild animals to a foreign country, not out of love and attachment towards the animals; instead, they serve as means of their livelihood. In Buddhist teachings, it is stated that this unrestrained pursuit of desires and material prosperity is the reason behind all miseries in the life of men. When the focus is on the fulfillment of desires, people become ego-centric and not concerned with the well beings of others. They become blind to the necessities of others and even become so hard-hearted to inflict pain and atrocities on their fellow beings. This high level of egocentrism is evident in the instance where the crew members of the ship purposely pull Pi into the lifeboat, along with other dangerous animals, to ensure their safety.

The men were nodding vigorously at me. When they took hold of me and lifted me in their arms, I thought nothing of it. I thought they were helping me. I was so full of trust in them that I felt grateful as they carried me in the air. Only when they threw me abroad

did I begin to have doubts...I realized something else: the hyena was the reason those sailors had thrown me into the lifeboat. They weren't trying to save my life. That was the last of their concerns. They were using me as fodder. (110)

The tendency of humans to put themselves at the center of the ecosystem or the attitude of egocentrism is reflected in the character of Pi, during the initial days of a shipwreck. When Pi is confined in the twenty-seven-foot lifeboat with a badly wounded zebra, a hyena, an orang-utan, and the two fifty-pound Bengal tiger named Richard Parker, he is always in a state of terror and fear of losing his territory and life. On analyzing the initial stages of Pi's journey, traces of egocentrism is found, which is reflected in the passivity and concern for only his safety. Jung's idea of man's disconnect with nature, is reflected in self-love and indifference attitude of Pi. In the perspective of Buddhism also, the self-centered view of man is the basic cause of all his suffering. The turmoil that Pi experienced during the initial stages of the shipwreck is the outcome of his self-centered ego. Pi's only concern then was, his survival, agony to maintain his territory, and egotistical plan of how to get rid of the tiger, to ensure his better future, all of which generated in him the rigid self, devoid of concern. Initially, a 'gentle vegetarian' as described by Pi himself, later on during the journey he is forced to fish actively for food and finally to catch and eat a turtle. These instances all portray the dominating outlook of Pi, as he views all the other nonhuman life forms as meant for his utilitarian intentions.

Gradually as the days left alone in the sea progresses, Pi's outlook towards nature and other life forms also began to change. The shipwreck days in the Pacific Ocean, for Pi, along with the ferocious tiger were of fortitude and struggles. During the initial days of the shipwreck, he is disturbed by the loss of his family, constantly threatened to be in the presence of wild animals, the dreadfulness of the sea, and utter loneliness and despair. The days of survival created in him a new outlook and perspective. He develops the endurance to adapt to the changing patterns of the sea. Pi surprises himself with the depth of his resolve to live, and his attitude becomes one of tolerance and understanding.

The first spark of this transformation from this ego-centric state to that of ecocentric one is reflected when Pi, at last, decides to keep Richard Parker alive, after several of his selfish attempts to get rid of the tiger fail so that he could get the lifeboat for himself. Pi tells of the motive that led him to this decision "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). Pi got this connection towards Richard Parker when he realized the friendly attitude of the animal towards him. He narrates this instance, which is the result of his close observation and understanding:

He was simply taking me in, observing me, in a manner that was sober but not menacing. He kept twitching his ears and varying the sideways turn of his head. It was all so, well, catlike. He looked like a nice, big, fat domestic cat, a 450-pound tabby. He made a sound, a snort from his nostrils. I pricked up my ears. He did it a second time. I was astonished. Prusten? (163)

The tiger expresses its friendliness and harmless intentions through '*prusten*' a puff through the nose, the expression of intimacy. Pi admits that what makes his survival possible is the presence of Richard Parker. At first, the tiger poses a constant threat to his life, but later it is obvious that a strong bond emerges between Pi and Richard Parker. His bonding with nature through the shedding of ego infused in him the ability to maintain a sustainable relationship with nature, and the ferocious animal, Richard Parker, a 450 pound Bengal tiger. The novel suggests that the mantra for survival is in striking a balance between man and nature. This realization has led him to the decision to keep Richard Parker alive. It is not that he did not have the choice and ability to kill the tiger for his safety and wellbeing, but he considered himself not above or superior to the tiger, but as part of himself and realized the right for both of them to survive as plain members of the biotic community.

After the transformation and the realization of the intrinsic value of all life forms, Pi's approach to nature is not conditioned by the logic of modernity, which promotes consumerist culture nor bound by the discourse of western dominance which is anthropocentric. Pi deeply reflects upon nature and the creatures surrounding him, not in terms of exploitation, but by realizing the intrinsic value of all-natural systems. Later on, he was able to build up an intimate bond with nature.

As the journey progresses, Pi becomes selfless and can identify with all life forms. The essence of integrity, love, kindness, and bonding in relationship with all living beings and nature surrounding him, is reflected

in his memories and descriptions about life at sea. On deeper understanding, it is realized that at the inner core Pi has awareness about the intrinsic value of nonhuman life and feels the oneness with nature.

Life of Pi draws attention to the rediscovery of man's ties with nature, in several ways. In the adverse environment, amid the harrowing shipwreck, though he was selfish in the initial stages concerned with his safety, he is not that self-enclosed or indifferent towards nature surrounding him. During those days when he was struggling hard to adjust to the sea and seasickness, he was cheered up by the company of the aquatic animals. One such instance is watching the fun-loving dolphins. Being left alone and exposed to nature, Pi gathers many insights about life and how much he is part of the earth.

Dolphins were fairly regular visitors. One group stayed with us a whole day and night. They were very gay. Their plunging and turning and racing just beneath the hull seemed to have no purpose other than sporting fun. I tried to catch one. But none came close to the gaff. And even if one had, they were too fast and too big. I gave up and just watched them. (122)

He experiences profound peace and enjoyable feelings from his natural surroundings. He gathers insights and language of unity from nature. He felt a sense of belongingness and brotherhood towards the natural beings which are reflected in these words: "I became attached to these oceanic hitchhikers... What I saw was an upside-down town, small, quiet and peaceable... whose citizens went about with the sweet civility of angels... it was a welcome relief for my frayed nerves" (198). The sea life infused in him consolation and positive energy to progress during the difficult circumstances.

Pi realizes the ecocentric holistic world view which focuses on the importance of all life forms. The basic principles of deep ecology and Buddhism also advocate this change in perception, from self-obsessed individuals to a state of egolessness. Pi provides vivid and pictorial descriptions of nature in the novel:

We saw several whales but none so close up as that first one. I would be alerted to their presence by their spouting. They would emerge a short distance away, sometimes three or four of them, a short-lived archipelago of volcanic islands. These gentle behemoths always lifted my spirits. I was convinced that they understood my condition . . . (230)

Pi does not look at nature in a detached way, but with care and consideration, as he would himself. It includes the seascape, marine life, dolphins, birds, albatrosses, Wilson's petrels, short-tailed shearwater, masked boobies; vivid descriptions of weather- rain, storms, blasts, thunder, lightning, and a carnivorous island. Pi could perceive himself reflected in all things in nature that surrounded him. Being left alone and exposed to nature Pi gathers many insights about life and how much he is part of the earth.

Surviving in the lifeboat along with the tiger, one day Pi encounters an algae island floating on the ocean. The island appears to him as "chlorophyll heaven" (41). At first, the fresh smell of this vegetation is intoxicating to Pi. "The smell of vegetation was extraordinarily strong. As for the greenness, it was so fresh and soothing that strength and comfort seemed to be physically pouring into my system through my eyes." (42). Nature exerts profound influence upon him. When he reaches the green algae island he gets a rejuvenated feeling, which enhances his bonding with nature.

Thus, it is seen that the shedding of self and embracing a perspective of viewing nature at the core, enabled the central character Pi to hold a unique bond with nature. The core of deep ecology and Buddhism - the realization of intrinsic value of nature and care for creation becomes evident in the novel. The deep ecological analysis of the text could bring about a change in man's relationship with nature. Pi's approach to nature gives an option to the readers, to embrace a new perspective of rediscovering ties with nature and to embrace, an ecocentric view, for a better future.

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