

A Saga of Human Resilience: Reading Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

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Abstract: Resilience is all about shifting our perceptions, changing our responses, and experiencing real growth. It is well defined by an American author Elizabeth Edwards "Resilience is accepting your new reality, even if it's less good than the one you had before. You can fight it, you can do nothing but scream about what you've lost, or you can accept that and try to put together something that's good" ("Resilience Remembered", 2010).

Resilient people often have a good sense of humour, patience, action-oriented approach, faith, optimism, tolerance of negative effect, adaptability to change etc. Whether an individual or a group of people, we have numerous examples of people who proved themselves and started their lives again after being badly affected by hazardous situations. Literature has promiscuous stories that deal with human resilience and one of them is Yann Martel's masterpiece *Life of Pi* that was published in 2001. *Life of Pi* is a story of an Indian Tamil boy named Piscine Molitor Patel who was later nicknamed as "Pi". The story of the novel revolves around the life of Pi who faced a shipwreck and had to survive on a lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean with a Bengal Tiger for 227 days. The present paper focuses on the qualities of being a resilient person and strategies that a person should take during crisis. It also emphasizes how Charles Darwin's theory of evolution works in it.

Key words: resilience, optimism, crisis, overcome, perception.

1. INTRODUCTION:

A resilient person would be capable and strong enough to persevere in adverse or stressful conditions and to take away positive meaning from that experience. Being resilient does not mean that you won't encounter problems or have difficulties but they have the power of overcoming a challenge in their life. A famous proverb also says, 'Fall down seven times, stand up eight' that is possible only for a resilient person who never gives up. Resilience needs to be built up and to be worked on it regularly by practicing of being positive and optimistic. In fact, a book named *21 Days to Resilience* reveals that,

Positive emotions play a large role in resilience. Research has shown that they help us rebound better from trauma and find opportunities for growth from stressful experiences (Montminy).

It further indicates that,

The only thing we have control over is that we have the ability to definitively and consciously change how we respond to what life throws at us at any given moment. We all endure challenges, big and small, which are meaningful opportunities for learning and building strength (Montminy).

Yann Martel is a Spanish-born Canadian author best known for the Man Booker Prize (2002) winning, an international bestseller novel *Life of Pi*. Yann Martel writes in English however, his first language is French. *Life of Pi* was also adapted for a film directed by Ang Lee in the year 2012. As the book was bestseller so the film won four Oscar awards. Nonetheless, it won several awards including Asia/Pacific American Award for Literature in 2002. *Life of Pi* has a hundred chapters divided into three parts. It all started in the year 1996 when the author was in Canada. Despite his best efforts, his second book did not get the reader's attention. He was restless and had little money so he flew to Bombay in India. He was also working on a novel set in Portugal in 1939. He was neither happy nor satisfied with his work and further, it died. In search of the new and real story, Yann reached in the town of Pondicherry that was the capital of French India. Amid his gloomy days, he got a response from a man who had a story for him. One day, reached to an Indian Coffee Shop on Nehru Street where he met a person named Francis Adirubasamy told him that he had a story that will make him believe in God, he also told to contact with the main character of the story. Later, in Toronto, he dialed the number of Mr. Patel who agreed to meet the author and this way Yann Martel knows about Mr. Patel's story and presents it in the first- person narrative. The story was just about the years back in Pondicherry.

2. ANALYSIS:

Mr. Patel, who presently lives in Scarborough, was a small slim man with dark eyes. He started telling his story by giving the answers to the author's curiosities. He told me that his name was kept after a swimming pool. His father's business partner Adirubasamy was a great swimming lover and according to him no swimming pool in the world was better than Piscine Molitor so they gave the Piscine Molitor Patel to him. Piscine and his brother called Mama Ji to Andirubasamy. Mama Ji started giving swimming instructions to Piscine since the age of seven. The Pondicherry entered the Union of India on November 1, 1954. Piscine's father ran a large hotel in Madras before leaving for Pondicherry. He was a great animal lover so he decided for zoo business as a portion of the grounds of Pondicherry Botanical Garden was available to rent- free by the government for zoo business. It was a huge zoo, big enough to require a train to explore it. Well, the zoo was pleasurable for Mr. Santosh Patel yet little irritating and the matter of headache too. However, it was paradise on earth for Piscine. He says,

I lived the life of a Prince. My alarm clock during my childhood was a pride of lions. They were no Swiss clocks, but the lions could be counted upon to roar their heads off between five-thirty and six every morning. Breakfast was punctuated by the shrieks and cried of howler monkeys, hill mynahs and Moluccan cockatoos (Martel 17).

Piscine tells that there were numbers of animals and birds including giraffe, hippo, camel, mandrill, monkeys, Orangutans, Shoebill and American bison etc. He also reveals the best time to visit any zoo is either early morning or evening when most animals come to the life. Further, he disagrees with the mindset of those people who think that animals are happy in the wild. Piscine states that animals yields for freedom, freedom that becomes dashed by those wicked men who throw the animals into a tiny jail. He presents the pathetic situation of imprisoned animals by giving several examples of different zoos.

Piscine turned towards the history of his name. His name was not like the name of others so he was used to making fun of his name in school days. The other students used to irritate him by calling the name Pissing Patel. He ignored them yet the word 'piss' always hurt him. Not only students, even teachers too, not deliberately, started shamefully distorting his name. Anyhow, with this slur, he passed from this St. Joseph's School and got admission in the top school of Pondicherry named Petit Seminaire. Ravi was also with him in this school, he was a good cricket player. Piscine was afraid of being mocked so he decided to beat Satan now. It was the first day of school. The teacher started taking attendance according to sitting arrangements and just before his name to be called, Piscine stood up. Piscine went towards blackboard to introduce himself. He explained,

My name is
Piscine Molitor Patel
Know to all as

---I double- underlined the first two letters of my given name---
Pi Patel

For good measure, I added---

$\Pi = 3.14$ (Martel 29)

Further, he did the same in all his classes and got a new nickname 'Pi'. Hence, it was the problem- solving quality of Pi with the help of that he closed the chapter of piss forever instead of living in shame with his name for a lifetime. Pi was a religious boy. He always connected religion with faith whether God, Allah or Jesus, he believed in all and doubted too. He used to visit temple, church and Masjid frequently.

To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation (Martel 36).

Richard Parker was a tiger in the zoo whose name had been exchanged with the name of the hunter. When the tiger was a cub, a hunter caught him drinking from a stream. So, the hunter kept his name Thirsty. Later hunter sold the tiger to Pi's zoo. Through a clerical error, the hunter's name Richard Parker and the tiger's name Thirsty got switched on the paperwork. Hence, the tiger was named as Richard Parker. Pi was always much excited with the animals, once he tried to give carnivore to Richard Parker as he wanted to see the new tiger very closely. Pi's father came to know about the incident and presented a horrible incident in front of all family members that changed his life. He taught them that animals do not think as humans do and a hungry animal can tear them if they try to come closer by keeping a goat in front of the tiger. The day was very frightening for Pi.

Pi came to know that his father had decided to leave India. His father believed that the animals were worth far more abroad than here in India. It would be difficult for them if the town council stopped supporting them how will they take care of animals. The land never belonged to them but the animals were theirs. So, he decided to sell them in Canada

to have enough money to start a new life. He also declared to ship most of the animals in North America. Soon, they headed towards Canada by a Japanese ship named the Tsimtsum. It was difficult for Pi and his family to leave the country yet they had to go further. Before going to sleep Pi's father gave tranquilizer to all animals so that they could bear the stress of travelling and do not feel seasick.

It was four days in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, out of Manila above the Mariana Trench, the deepest spot on earth, the ship pushed on and moved with the slow and massive confidence. All members on the ship were sleeping when Pi heard some noise. It was heavy rain and thunderstorm that made him excited and he wished to go out to see and enjoy. Ravi did not accompany him. Pi went upstairs.

It was only when I had pushed open the heavy door leading onto the main deck that I realized what the weather was like, did it qualify as a storm? (Martel 100)

There were rain and wind like a monsoon. It looked impressive to Pi. He was soaked and chilled and enjoyed as nature was showing him thrilling scenes. But after a few moments later he realized that it was a heavy storm. He decided to return to safety.

Inside the ship, there were noises. Deep structural groans. I stumbled and fell. No harm done. I got up with the help of the handrails. I went down the stairwell four steps at a time. I had gone down just one level when I saw water. Lots of water. (Martel101)

Of course, the ship was listing badly. The sea was rising, and the ship was sinking. He saw the image of floating those wild animals. Did he think about the officers where they were? He was worried about his family members. Pi ran towards the bridge. He climbed the middle bridge and finally at the port side he got three crewmen. He cried for help, suddenly they put an orange life jacket into his arms and with a sound of the whistle they threw him overboard. Pi was much surprised by their action. He was in a dilemma about to trust them or not. He insisted them to save his family. The lifeboat was separated from the ship as a zebra jumped on it. Pi blew his whistle for help and also tried to sail the boat near the ship but with the help of oar Richard Parker climbed into the boat and Pi jumped in the ocean. He was a good swimmer and knew how to hold the breath inside the water. After some times, he climbed and hanged onto the tiller of the boat. He felt sorry for his family. He had lost everyone. The next day he found himself all alone amid The Pacific Ocean on a little boat he was with a zebra and a hyena that was spotted under the tarpaulin. With the help of his oar, he keeps himself safe from a hyena. Further, he saw orange juice Orangutan came on sailing on the bundle of bananas that gave Pi a sense of comfort. Hyena was dangerous for him therefore Pi's day passed sitting at one corner upside of the tarpaulin and at night hyena killed to zebra. The next day, Pi remembers about the supplies that the crew members keep in a lifeboat for an emergency. He got something to drink and eat but that day was more difficult for him as hyena killed to Orangutan and was about to attack Pi. At the same time, Richard Parker emerged under the tarpaulin and killed to the hyena. Ultimately, only Pi and Richard Parker were left on the boat. It is the law of nature that the stronger one always survives. Hyena was stronger than zebra and orangutan so he killed them and Richard was the strongest one in all so he killed hyena. Now, it was only Pi who was there with Richard Parker. Therefore, he created a small tethered raft from floating vests to which he retreats for safety from Richard Parker. He tried many techniques for getting help but he was being failed all the time. He prayed to God to help him and give strength for survival. He tried to read maps. He got rashes on his body. He started to write a diary and to follow the path of hope and faith in God that were the key points of his journey with a tiger. After some days, due to the seasickness, Richard Parker started feeling uneasy to Pi made him comfortable by using his whistle and treating with him as he is in a zoo. He also gave water to drink and thought that Richard used to eat average 5 kilos meat in the zoo. Pi was sure that Richard will be getting hungry and it was not good for his safety. Tigers are powerful swimmers too. So, the little bit of water between Pi and Richard would not be any protection for Pi if Richard gets hungry enough. Despite being a religious person and being against killing, Pi started learning to catch fishes for Richard Parker. Before he learned Parker jumped into the ocean. Due to fear, Pi boarded the boat with his raft and tried to kill Richard who was in the water trying to get into the ship. But Pi could not kill him and made a way for Richard to get into the boat. Days passed, Pi was on raft and Richard in the boat. The boy who was pure vegetarian, who had followed many moral values in his life, finally learned to catch fish and killed too. Pi had biscuits with him on his raft but one night a humpback whale came too close to the boat destroying the raft and its supplies. Now he was not anything to eat. Now he had nothing to eat except fishes. It was the first time in his life when he ate fish for survival. Further, he decided to stay in the boat only for that he needs to train Richard Parker. After several attempts, he got success. Pi made Richard aware that one side is his portion and another one is of Richard. Richard too started obeying him. It was the place where Pi had limited things but he learned to use those things like knife, pencil, rope etc. Somewhere, the presence of Richard Parker's fear was the reason that Pi was still alive. Parker's presence always kept him attentive and brought peace too. He mentioned about fear that,

I must say a word about fear. It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary. How well I know. It has no decency, respects no law or convention, and shows no mercy (Martel 155).

Pi got the purpose of his life to take care of Parker's need. One day suddenly he saw a ship far away, he tried to seek help by using fire guns but again he was not successful. Pi used to keep reminding himself not to lose hope. With the passing of weeks, Pi and Richard both became weak and tired of this Journey. Pi thought that soon he is going to die. Unfortunately, again he had to face a storm. Afterwards, the next morning he found himself on a floating island where he got edible plants, freshwater pools and a large population of meerkats. Pi and Richard regained energy and got refreshed on the island. At night everything changed, Richard returned to the boat, water pool turned acidic. Pi slept on a tree with meerkats where he found a human tooth embedded in a flower. Pi came to know that the island was carnivorous so he decided to leave the next morning with lots of freshwater, edible plants and meerkats for Richard. Eventually, after some days, they reached the coast of Mexico. Pi cried a lot when Richard Parker did not acknowledge him before disappearing into the jungle. Pi was rescued and brought to a hospital by some local men where two insurance agents of Japanese Freighter Company interviewed him but they did not believe his story. The two agents asked him to tell the true story on that had happened so Pi had to tell a different story to them so that they could believe. Hence, they were not fully satisfied.

3. CONCLUSION:

To conclude, there are remarkable examples of struggle and resilience in the character of Pi. He had faced many situations that were disastrous for him but he remained strong. He had to leave India that saddened him. Then, he lost all his loved ones but he handled his emotions for further journey. He was left alone with the tiger yet he kept calm and believed on himself that he could deal with this situation by his strategies and intelligence. He remained realistic all the time and reminded himself that God is with him. He was also empathetic towards Richard Parker that helped him in his survival. His faith kept him alive. In the time of adversity, floating Island was the best example of the presence of God. Because no one believed on him for they had never heard about or seen to that island. It was Pi's optimism that gave him a solution in all worst situations. In addition to it, the most prominent point was the flexible and adaptable nature that helped him in the water. A boy who throughout his life remained against killing or eating non-vegetarian food had learned cutting fish and changed into a carnivore. Eventually, the survival of Pi made the author believe in God. It was a herculean task to survive in The Pacific Ocean with a tiger for 227 days. Yet Pi succeeded, coped from his unwanted experiences and started a new life again where he got a job, got married and had two children. Further, he led a happy life and his story got published by the author as *Life of Pi*.

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