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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Ecocritical Reading of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi***Deepali Yadav**Amity University
Noida, Uttar Pradesh (India)

*“Only when the last tree has been cut down;
Only when the last river has been poisoned;
Only when the last fish has been caught;
Only then you will find that money cannot be eaten”*

Yann Martel's 'Life of Pi' justifies the irony behind the stated proverb. It develops the bond between human and non-human environment. Entire narration can be read in two ways. Firstly through biocentrism, when the story takes its course with the involvement of animals and humans in all three sections- in zoo, in ocean and in Mexico where Japanese officials cannot find it true to believe in animal story but they readily accept human story (anthropocentrism). While the second manner of approaching the novel is through eco-centrism. This concept has been brought into force while giving the descriptions of certain places like France and Munnar, in the novel.

Biocentrism

Biocentrism is an ecological term, which places equal emphasis on non-human species like animals, sea-creatures, birds and land when compared with human species. Paul Taylor, a renowned philosopher, remarked once that man is in no way superior to other living creatures on earth. The earth belongs equally to non-human species and hence man should seek peaceful and harmonious way of co-existence with other species.

Discarding this bio-centric belief, novel begins in a flashback tone where Pi's father has decided to transform some portion of Pondicherry Botanical Garden into a zoo. At that time Pi was only fifteen years old but it should be kept in mind that Pi's views stated in the novel were his current views when the author had gone to interview him, rather than being a young child's opinion which would have been easily overlooked. Though Pi's opinion about animals changes with the furthering of the narrative but nowhere in the novel, does he find anything wrong in running a zoo. Pi recounts that Pondicherry at that time had nearly no amusement source and hence running a zoo appeared to be a great idea to his father. Zoo was kind of assurance of earning huge profits, as being the only amusement destination it would attract many visitors daily. It is pity that in this whole conception of doing business through wildlife, nobody thought about the everyday inconvenience of animals. But then again second thought should also be given to the place in question to be transformed. His father decided to transform botanical garden into a zoo! Incidents like these, serve an image of our present day society. We witness such stories daily in newspapers and magazines, where rich businessmen forcefully take away the fertile, irrigated, agricultural land for their construction sites. Sometimes even the deforestation is carried out in nearly acres of land for these construction sites. But it is very shocking that Pi too did not find any fault in this and justified his father's building of a zoo.

Not only in the first instance described above, but the entire narrative of first part appears quite contradictory. Beginning with Pi's long speech where he explains the causes behind animals' death in zoo,

“The obituary of zoo animals that have died from being fed foreign bodies would include gorillas, bison, storks,...and most variety of deer, ruminant and songbird. Among zookeepers, Goliath’s death is famous, he was a bull elephant seal...He died of internal bleeding after someone fed him broken bottle” (Martel 31).

He goes on explaining that in spite of facing many problems in the smooth functioning of zoo like adequate arrangement of food, building up proper shelter for animals, involvement in lot of legal issues regarding the health of all animals, a zookeeper is further made to suffer from the harsh criticism of various animal rights organizations. The motive behind reporting of these difficulties, gives the impression of Pi’s desperate attempt to defend his father from accusations. By listing all the charges and problems of a zoo keeper himself, he seems to make others feel sympathetic about his father’s business thus completely turning out his father from the frame of being blamed further. From this entire episode, the question that follows is that if he knew that animals in zoo were easily prone to death than in jungle then why did he favour his father’s business? What is the need of defending the guilty? Pi never answered these questions; on the contrary he adopted an easy way of escapism. He regarded visitors responsible for animal deaths who fling anything and everything inside the cages. He seemed to forgot the fact that if anyone decides to run a business, the profit or loss of entire business rests on the owner. In the same way none other than Pi’s father can be blamed for the concerned deaths. Consequently the truth that comes out is that hardly anyone is concerned about death of animals. The animal’s death is rendered as just another death because society has completely isolated itself from all such problems which lie beyond their selfish ends. This is the only reason how people play blames games. As nobody has time to delve into the reality of matter, it provides other people with chance to mould truth and present it in whichever way they want.

Another aspect, of which Pi can be accused, is his idea of supporting the belief of caging animals. He does not find anything erroneous in ridding animals off their natural habitat and using them for amusement purposes. He gives many reasons to justify why zoos are better place for animals than an open territory but he overlooks the most important fact that freedom is valuable to everyone. Not only we but nearly half of the world has experienced those times when we were ruled by British. We justified our need to secure freedom through revolts, movements depicting ourselves as slaves and colonized who were ruthlessly exploited by colonizers. So is it difficult for us to put animals in the same place and think about their state? By making them captive, we are just replacing colonizers with ourselves and colonized with the animals.

Later in the novel Pi’s father decided to shift from Pondicherry to Canada, due to the occurrence of emergency This decision was made bearing in mind the huge loss which his family had to suffer in times of emergency. Pi explains,

“To prosper, a zoo needs parliamentary government, democratic elections, freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of association, rule of law and everything else enshrined in India’s constitution....Long-term bad politics is bad for business.” (79).

This makes it evident that he does not have any guilt conscience in taming animals and forcing them to live in confines. It is to be notes that his family did not find anything wrong with emergency except that emergency led people to stay back at their home. They did not think of emergency as social problem but only as their personal problem. This attitude of Mr Patel, the zoo owner, shows how intensely he was engrossed in making money. He not only decided to take his family abroad but also the animals of zoo too. He had plan of selling them there at high prices. As Himalayan and sloth bears, Indian elephants, Nilgiri tahrs were found only in eastern region of world hence he made a point to sell them in foreign land do as to ensure his luxurious future there.

Martel has efficiently depicted this dark side of human nature. Concepts like biocentrism are brought into force only to put an end to these human cruelties. It attempts to stop man from thinking that he alone is the epicentre of the universe like Pi's father.

“..deep ecologists say that humans must exist interdependently with other species. Because an attack on an individual species is an attack on the whole, humanity must humbly recognize its lack of the right to dominate, and realize that the fate of other species is bound up with the fate of humanity” (http://library.thinkquest.org/26026/Philosophy/deep_ecology.html). Institutions like PETA too are doing their bit but nothing can be changed by few institutions and organizations unless we ourselves decide to change our attitude of treating all species equally.

The second part of the novel 'The Pacific Ocean' consists of struggle description for territory, between Pi and Richard Parker (the tiger), on one boat. In the beginning there were few other animals which gradually got eaten up by other physically superior animal thus justifying the concept of life-cycle. Only Parker and Pi were left at last. In order to save his life from Parker, Pi decided to tame tiger, as that was the only way left, to remain alive. He applied the same tactics as that of a ring man of circus in taming Parker. Pi's act of taming tiger cannot be condemned here, because in this situation, it is his necessity to do so. But yes it is on our part to remember that ring master is never under compulsion to take charge of tigers and beat them with hunter only to offer a good circus show.

Pi being a son of zoo owner was familiar with animals' behaviour. He talked about it in the first part which he brings into practice in this part. He knows that animals always want to maintain certain distance hence one must respect their feelings without trying to break that distance barrier. According to him, animals don't attack anyone because they are hungry or bloodthirsty but only when someone enters their territory. They always believe in living in own territory and any attempt to invade their territory will result to attack from their side. So Pi now decided to build his own separate territory from that of Richard Parker. After few days Parker too got an idea that Pi understands his idea of space and willingly depends on Pi for his food. Parker is portrayed with some consciousness in the novel as he did not attack Pi in the entire journey. Pi too knew that Parker won't attack him till he provides Parker with food from sea. At this juncture it would be interesting to contrast Pi's father with Parker. Parker in spite of carnivore did not feel the need of killing Pi till his basic need of food got fulfilled. On the other hand Pi's father, being a human, to whose heart we attach notions of beauty, love, peace, humanity, did not hesitate in extracting money through animals till the very end. This episode clearly states that animals do not have tendency to hurt humans but it is greed of humans which forces them to land up in their territory and develop enmity with them. This fight of territory led man commit many crimes against animals and environment. The novel 'Life of Pi' also shows the battle for gaining control over other by inheriting broad area on life-boat. It is a novel of anthropomorphism, retelling how humans try to justify their every act as good even if it might turn out to be harmful for other creatures.

In the next few days Pi made several plans to save himself from tiger because it was obvious that as soon as the tiger would feel hungry his next prey would be Pi (only if Pi failed to catch food for him from sea). He thought of many plans of killing Parker that would set him free from the dangers of Parker.

He thought to “Push Him Off the Lifeboat”, “Kill Him with the Six Morphine Syringes”, “Attack Him with All Available Weaponry”, “Choke Him”, “Poison Him, Set Him on Fire, Electrocute Him” (158).

But the idea of taming tiger came very late in Pi's mind. By the time Pi remains busy in making and rejecting his own plans searching for the best idea possible of getting rid from Parker, Parker made a sound from his nostrils which was neither 'woof' nor 'meow' but 'Prusten'. 'Prusten' which is the quietest of tiger calls is meant to express friendliness and harmless intentions. It was ironical that one fearful man who was continuously thinking every time to murder the animal got a call of friendliness. This was the moment in Pi's life which changed his notion about animals. Though the call of friendliness was from tiger but Pi's acceptance of that gesture can be regarded no less. There are men who seek pleasure in killing innocent animals. Pi's feelings about Parker changed suddenly,

"A part of me did not want Richard Parker to die at all, because if he died I would be left alone with despair, a foe even more formidable than a tiger. If I still had the will to live, it was due to Richard Parker. He kept me thinking too much about my family and my tragic circumstances. He pushed me to go on living...I am grateful. Its plain truth without Richard Parker, I wouldn't be alive today to tell you my story" (164)

Yann Martel, has marked the development of Pi's character throughout the novel. In the beginning we meet Pi who did not find anything good in leaving animals to live in forests. He advocated the view of keeping them in bars where they can be served with all amenities. Then we witness Pi who went on thinking the worst of all plans that can be adopted to kill Parker but now with the furthering of the narrative he started feeling for Parking. He, at this moment, seemed to realise the importance of Parker on boat because to have a companion (be it an animal) is far much better than just being a lonely wanderer in seas for unknown days. He decided to tame Parker but that can only be considered as an act of self-defence and not torture or exploitation of animal. By taming it would have become easy for him to control Parker according to the necessities of time and also make him stand through the adversities of hunger, seasickness, thirst if the situation demanded so. "And so it came to be Plan Number Seven Keep Him Alive" (136)

Pi not only grew fond of Parker in course of his sailing but also of all other sea creatures. He felt that nature around him formed quiet and peaceable sight which came to him as a relief for distressed nerves whose effect he has successfully recorded

"If you want to see wildlife, it is on foot...you must explore the forest. It is same with the sea. You must stroll through the Pacific...to see the wealth.it holds" (176).

In the third part of novel 'Benito Juarez Infirmary, Tomatlan, Mexico' Pi and Parker are seen landing on the shore of Mexico after 227 days' of journey in Pacific Ocean. But as they reached the shore Parker left Pi and went to jungle without acknowledging any emotion to him which deeply hurt Pi. Pi was saddened by the fact that Parker did not even bothered to look back at his saviour. It might be possible Pi being a human thinks too much about his favours of supplying food to Parker. But if Pi considers Parker as ungrateful he should think twice before levelling such charge on him as it was Parker who did a huge favour on Pi by not killing him on a boat where Pi had nowhere to go to save his life. It is only we humans who attach too much importance to every action but animals just do it without being grateful or ungrateful to anyone.

Later Pi was taken to local hospital where he was questioned by two Japanese officials about the cause behind sinking of Tsimtsum ship. Pi answers everything truthfully by narrating his journey experience with animals as his companions. The Japanese officials turn down this explanation of Pi as absurd and ask for some story which can be believed as true. Pi retells them his story later by replacing animals with his mother, cook and sailor. The officials become too ready to place their trust on him when the story is replaced by human beings. The

story becomes one of murder and cannibalism and, ironically, the human in this alternative story are said to behave like animals.

Ecocentrism

“Ecocentrism goes beyond biocentrism with its fixation on organisms, for in the ecocentric view people are inseparable from the inorganic/organic nature that encapsulates them. They are particles and waves, body and spirit, in the context of Earth's ambient energy.” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecocentrism>)

In the beginning of novel Pi gave review of few French rivers and pools which were made dirty by humans disposing off their waste in it. He learnt swimming from his father's friend, Francis Adirubaswamy, whom he called 'Mamaji.' He was champion of a swimming competition of whole South India. So at the time of colonial rule Francis went to study in Paris where he became great swimmer. His all stories were related to the description of swimming in French pools. Talking about one of the pools after which Pi was named 'Piscine Deligny', Francis tells that in spite of being the venue for 1900 Olympics, its water was too dirty

“the water in the pool came straight from Seine, unfiltered and unheated. It was cold and dirty...The water, having crossed all of Paris, came in foul enough. Then people in the pool made it utterly disgusting. “In conspiratorial whispers, with shocking details to back up his claim, he assured that the French had very low standards of personal hygiene”. (10)

Giving reference of other pool in the same place he says “There water was so much a gob and spit floating in the water, I thought I was swimming through jellyfish” (11)

This condition of French rivers runs parallel to Indian rivers covered with filth and waste as in holy river of Ganga. Today, environmentalists all over the world have come together to support the cause of making Ganga pollution free of industrial waste and other human waste but hardly any difference has been made. We need to understand that dirt in the rivers and lakes is not only harmful for sea creatures but also for the food crops as it is the same water from which we irrigate crops. Nature has built everything in coherence with each other, so if we try to disturb anything, the whole natural system will get affected. Man must understand that even the most important part of his life, religion, also explains the need of feeling one with the environment Almost all religions, sociologists would agree, have their roots in the worship of nature.

The scenic description of Munnar district of India is apt to relate the philosophy of religion and nature together. This place gave a new beginning to Pi's life because it was here when Pi developed the urge to know more about religion which in turn made him realise about the importance of earth. This theory of deep ecological religious belief goes hand in hand with the theory of ecocentrism which can better be described in the words of Pi

“I loved my prayer rug....wherever I laid it I felt special affection for the patch of ground beneath it and the immediate surroundings, which to me is a clear indication that it was a good prayer rug because it helped me remember the earth is creation of God and sacred the same all over.” (76).

Conclusion

Contemporary novels like Life of Pi, have begun to develop parallel relationship between environment and literature thus broadening the sphere of nature studies in literature. It is witnessed that theorists oppose traditional method of studying literature. They feel that literature gives equal opportunity for studying individual and his environment rather than merely making it a platform for conducting psychological or socio-political research. Yann

Martel has not only dealt with the issues of environmental concern but also has hinted out the ways through which these problems can be skilfully handled.

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