

Analytical Study on *Life of Pi*: Exploring Marginalized Identities Across Cultures

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Abstract

Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi* explores how identity is shaped by different cultures and religions. The protagonist of the novel, Piscine Molitor Patel (Pi), gets attracted to all three religions - Hinduism, Christianity, and Islamic religions, showing his interest in all three religions and their practices. This narrative reflects India's religious diversity and the challenges faced by people with mixed cultural and spiritual identities. As Pi moves from India to Canada due to unfortunate situations and later survives at sea, his journey represents these struggles. Living on a lifeboat with the animals, it symbolizes how one must adapt, stay strong, and explore one's way to understand the world. Being open-minded and inclusive can help societies embrace diversity. The novel presents a powerful message about identity, survival, and the beauty of blended cultures coming together. The paper explores how people with mixed identities face more difficulties with acceptance and understanding in new environments. The story of *Life of Pi* illustrates the interconnectedness of identity, migration, and faith in shaping

an individual's sense of self. Pi's story is an icon of accepting mixed identities in a multicultural world.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, identity crisis, religion, migration, cultural diversity

Introduction

Cultural identity is an integral part of literature and society. Yann Martel is a contemporary Canadian author who is best known for his Man Booker Prize-winning Novel *Life of Pi* (2001). His literary output includes *Life of Pi*, *High Mountains of Portugal*, *Beatrice and Virgil*, and *Self*. His short stories include: *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*, *Manners of Dying*, and *Mirrors to Last till Kingdom Come*. The novel deals with the themes of religious faith and spiritual belief. Yann Martel explores identity through regional and cultural variations, particularly in the context of marginalized communities.

The protagonist of the novel, Piscine Molitor Patel (Pi), was born and brought up in Pondicherry, a former French colony in India. His parents named him after a famous and luxurious swimming pool in France called Piscine Molitor. His father, Santosh Patel, hails from a Hindu background, but he was secular and rationalist, and his mother, Gita Patel, was also raised as Hindu, but she had a Baptist education as an adult; she is described as non-religious. Pi's mother did not actively participate in any religion, but she encouraged Pi to read as much as he could. His family moved from Pondicherry to Canada due to an emergency declared by the Indian government. Before going to Canada, they sold most of their animals to different zoos. Only two of the animals remained along with them. Pi's father wanted to provide a better life for his sons, unfortunately their ship drowns in the water and his parents die. His journey from India to Canada caused him to feel like a victim of his own circumstances. As an adult, Pi was attracted to Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. He saw the world in two ways. One is Indian culture, shaped by his roots, and the other one is learned British culture. All these situations made him live a multicultural life.

Identity Crises in Known and Unknown

Identity is one of the most controversial topics in the postcolonial world and even in literature. In the novel, Pi's identity is moving from a familiar to an unfamiliar world. Identity is not fixed; it is an ongoing process. As the shipwreck occurs in island waters, Pi somehow survives, and along with him, some of the animals also remained. Pi finds himself alone in the lifeboat in the

middle of the Pacific Ocean. In the beginning he is safe, but then he soon realizes that he's sharing the boat with Richard Parker, a Bengal tiger. It is the turning point for him, as his known world is totally collapsed. Pi uses some tricks to assert dominance over Richard Parker. It is hard for Pi's family to move from India to Canada. At a certain point, "Pi feels that he had entered into a jungle of foreignness where everything is new, strange, and difficult" (Martel 70). His journey from India to Canada gave him a different worldview, and he was also forced to adapt his nature to survive.

Pi's identity is deeply influenced by his upbringing in Pondicherry, a region that represents colonial hybridity. Bhabha points out that, hybridity is nothing but mixing of two cultures to create new one (159). The theory of hybridity suggests that individuals in postcolonial societies create more cultures to interconnect symbolically. Pi expresses this hybridity through his Tamil heritage and colonial education. His struggles to practice multiple religions, mirroring the challenges faced by marginalized communities, and rejecting rigid categories in favour of having inclusive identities.

Religious identity plays a crucial role in Pi's marginalization. While he embraces Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam, religious leaders insist that he must choose only one faith. "It is not possible to believe in three religions at once," Piscine said "Why not?" (Martel, 70). The novel gives a narrow mindset of people who often impose their identities. Individual identity is neither created by hierarchies nor supreme powers. In the novel, the main character suffers to fix strong boundaries for himself.

Fanon says people are isolated from themselves (206) Migrated people move from one place to another place that makes their life more complicated. When Pi is on the lifeboat, his identity is set, as it happens for many marginalized cultures, people who fly from one region to other region. Bhabha in his *Orientalism* introduces a concept of "in-betweenness," which means existing between cultures, people exist between hometown or adopted country. (4). Pi's story illustrates how immigrants face difficulties in preserving their cultural identity with all the burdens of hardships.

Moreover, *Life of Pi* highlights regional variations through identity within India. As a Tamil boy growing up in Pondicherry, he belongs to a regional community dominating South Indian cultural hierarchies. Eventually the novel illustrates the difficulties faced by the individual rules posed by the supreme powers. Pi's story makes us to understand the importance of accepting

blended identities in this supernatural world. This experimental study emphasizes the gifts individuals demonstrate when they are exploring multiple religions they belong to.

Pluralism, Culture, and Religion in India

Pluralism is the belief or system that accepts the existence of many ideas, cultures, and even religions. Pi is deeply religious, spiritual, and curious about God. He embraces Hinduism from his parents. He discovers Christianity through the church priest and Islamic religious teachings from the Sufi imam. *Life of Pi* clearly shows that religious pluralism is nothing but practicing all religions at the same time, influenced by religious leaders and his parents. Pi does not look at religion as limited but rather as multiple ways that lead to one truth. The novel highlights the sufferings of a religious pluralistic society that often implies complex religious beliefs. His journey becomes symbolic of the struggles faced by individuals who exist between two cultural identities and traditions.

Pi's upbringing in Pondicherry shows him in a culturally blended space where Indian traditions exist within colonial influences. Pi expresses his identity not only in this multicultural world but also in his spiritual beliefs. In Martel's *Life of Pi*, the protagonist says, "Bapu Gandhi said, 'All religions are true.' I just want to love God." (76). Pi explores Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam, which upsets traditional understanding of cultural and religious belongingness.

Religious leaders told Pi that he needed to take up one religion instead of following three of them. This is how people are treated in society; they will try to impose their choices on others based on their culture. Famous thinker Amartya Sen argues that people should not be forced to confine themselves to one religion, culture, or political identity, he calls that idea as singular identity (2). Through this story, the author Martel suggests that one should have more open-minded about spirituality.

Pi's migration from one country to another country further complicates his sense of self-identity. Pi finds himself in a world of difficulties, as do many immigrants who must find a way to balance culture and power with pressures of cultural assimilation. The tension is evident when he experienced it on the boat; he quotes that "I was alone and orphaned in an unfamiliar world." (Martel, 85). The sense of isolation tells of the sufferings of marginalized people that they face in their day-to-day lives. The author presents a powerful message about how migrated people feel the pressure physically, mentally, and emotionally.

In postcolonial contexts, Martel focuses on individual identity crises with religious pluralism. Mohsin Hamid, in his novel *Exit West*, explores the shift of migrants and the changing of their identity through force by the supreme powers. These novels highlight the challenges faced by the characters who live between cultures, even if they differ in their treatment within the society, because regional and cultural variations do exist in the society.

Culture - Power - Crisis

Power, culture, and crisis are deeply interrelated to one another in society and literature. In Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia's relationship begins in a society torn by wars and strict cultural norms, which follow them. Saeed practices Muslim culture, prays daily, and is deeply inspired by his religious and spiritual background. Nadia wears a black robe usually worn by religious Muslim women. Nadia does not wear this out of devotion, but to protect herself. Here, the author says religion can be used both as a tool for control and as a source of strength. In *Life of Pi*, Pi's father takes his sons to the zoo to teach them an unforgettable lesson about the danger of wild animals. To emphasize this, he places a live goat into the cage of a Bengal tiger at Pondicherry Zoo. The tiger automatically kills and eats the goat in front of the boys. Based on this incident, the boys quickly learn that it is the way of life for superior power to dominate the inferior. These differences show how *Life of Pi* represents a blend of religions as a path to personal growth. On the other hand, *Exit West* shows religion as something that influences both culture and society.

Survival of the Fittest

All people cannot survive in a new culture; survival requires both acceptance with adaptability. In the novel *Life of Pi*, Pi survives on the lifeboat not because he is physically powerful but because he is mentally strong and adaptable. Pi is a theist; he believed in the existence of God, which helps him to survive alone on the sea voyage. Pi realizes that he must keep Richard Parker alive to stay for himself. The tiger helps to keep Pi alert and vigilant. Pi learns how to catch fish and he collects rainwater. He eats foods that he never imagined eating like raw fish, turtle blood, and meerkats. In the initial days on the boat, he was powerless but later when he believes in God and religion, he becomes more strong and powerful. He builds his own empire and trains Richard Parker; he uses whistle sounds to feed Richard Parker. Pi himself states that, I survived 227 days that's how my long trial lasted over seven months. The protagonist of the novel is floating in the Pacific; he must construct his own means of survival. Like migrants, Pi

must adapt to unfamiliar environments. His reliance on storytelling allows him to share two different versions of his survival, one with animals and one with humans. He demonstrates how marginalized voices often reshape their narratives to fit in the world. Pi's dual narratives reflect the struggles of marginalized individuals to have their experiences recognized and validated.

Beyond the global experience of migration, *Life of Pi* also explores regional marginalization within India. Pi, as a Tamil boy, occupies a unique position within Indian society. As the protagonist states, Born and brought up in Pondicherry, which was the French part of India. My father owned a zoo, he highlights his identity as Tamil heritage, French influence, and Western style of newness. The theme is further reflected in the different ways religions are practiced in India. While Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam are all present in the community, each tradition operates within a structured hierarchy. Pi's ability to explore multiple religious traditions without strictly following one practice is found in many marginalized communities. Here the novel states that identity is not a static one but rather it is a continuous process, shaped by the regional and cultural traditions.

Pi's experience on the lifeboat demonstrates how individuals from marginalized roots often develop resilience in response to exclusion and adversity. He had a great bond with the Bengal tiger. Richard Parker shows the symbolic duality of identity, both the civilized self and the primal self that exists within all individuals. At one point, Pi states, "Without the animal called Richard Parker, I wouldn't be alive today" (Martel, 164). Highlighting the need for individuals to embrace all aspects of themselves in order to survive.

Adaptability is the Solution for Cultural Crisis

Adaptability means the ability to adjust oneself to the new culture, environment, or situation. In simple words we can say that it is the willingness to survive in any circumstance. After the shipwreck, Pi makes a raft for himself to survive on the ocean. The biggest adaptation is living with Richard Parker as Pi must learn to control him, feed him, and coexist with him. Pi also learns survival skills, protects himself from the sun, catches fish, and collects water for himself. He understands the animal's behaviour, and in spite of all these sufferings, he holds his faith on God.

This adaptability is a common experience among marginalized groups who have navigated diverse cultural expectations while preserving their own identities. The author had great ability to write two versions of the story, one fantastical and one realistic, demonstrating the power of

storytelling in shaping the self-identity. Marginalized people use storytelling as a means of communication, asserting their identities in societies they seek to remove or simplify their experiences. In the novel, while Pi is moving from India to Canada, his survival on the lifeboat symbolizes the existence of flyers between the cultures. The immigrants often face many challenges in balancing their cultural and religious beliefs against new expectations. Pi realizes that he was alone in the unfamiliar world and that loneliness always accompanies migrated people.

Martel's *Life of Pi* delves into regional identity, rooted in the postcolonial world within the broader Indian national identity. His upbringing in a former French colony shows him as a product of colonial history. Martel creates Pi's identity as one that is led by cultural and social settings. In *Life of Pi*, Pi offers multiple versions of the survival story, one with animals and one with humans. He feels alienated when Richard left him alone on the sea. Mirroring the fact that many marginalized people adapt their works to reach the dominant group's expectations.

Martel's *Life of Pi* offers an ultimate exploration of identity, particularly about cultural hybridity, migration, and survival. Pi's journey from a multicultural childhood in Pondicherry to the limited existence of migration and the isolation of the sea represents the sufferings of marginalized individuals who must explore multiple cultural affiliations while facing exclusion and misunderstanding. The protagonist's ability to embrace fluid religious and cultural identities against challenges from rigid customs imposed by hierarchies is key to his survival.

Over the course of Pi's experiences, the author highlights the need to recognize and respect blended identities, mostly within marginalized communities. The novel insists that identity is important, and is built by an amalgamation of regional, cultural, and personal experiences. In a world that increasingly runs with issues of migration, diversified beliefs and mixed multiculturalism, this novel serves as a powerful weapon and proof of the resistance and adaptability of those who may be in-between cultures. By accepting all these, societies can move towards the greater identities; where all voices are heard and valued.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Life of Pi* illustrates how individual identity is shaped by different cultures, religions, and life experiences. Pi's journey from India to Canada was a lonely one and shows how hard it is to be in new environments. One must reject imposed identities and create a new image, like Pi. He follows Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam, showing his admiration for all

three religions. This faith gives him strength to survive on the lifeboat. Even though he faces many challenges, he learns to adjust himself and stay strong. His story implies that people who follow different cultures and religions can live together peacefully. In today's world, many people move from one country to another country for a better life. This novel reminds us to accept other people, cultures, religions, and respect different ways of life. Pi's journey helps us understand that being open-minded and kind makes for a better multicultural world.

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