
Navigating the Blue Ocean: Anthropomorphic Dualities in Yann Martel's Life of Pi

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Abstract: This paper explores the characterization of the Pacific Ocean in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* through the lens of Blue Humanities. Moving beyond its role as a mere geographical backdrop, the ocean emerges as a dynamic entity that shapes Pi Patel's physical, emotional, and spiritual journey. By examining Martel's use of anthropomorphism, metaphorical descriptions, and thematic dualities, this study argues that the Pacific functions as a character in its own right—one that teaches, tests, and transforms. The analysis highlights how the ocean's alternating ferocity and serenity parallel Pi's internal struggles, while also serving as a catalyst for his faith, resilience, and existential awareness. In doing so, the paper situates Martel's novel within contemporary oceanic literary discourse, reinforcing the significance of the sea as a vital force in storytelling traditions.

Keywords: Blue Humanities, ocean literature, anthropomorphism, survival literature, storytelling, fiction.

Introduction: The term "Blue Humanities" may belong to the twenty-first century, but the significance of the ocean in the history of storytelling predates even biblical events such as Noah's Ark and Moses' encounter with the Red Sea. Since the dawn of storytelling, throughout all sorts of literature from various parts of the globe and from distinguished cultures around the world, the ocean has been playing a vital role in the art of storytelling. Whether intentional or accidental, the characterization of the ocean has remained an inevitable and central force in the panorama of storytelling. This practice of imbuing the ocean into storytelling, particularly within modern experimental fiction, forms the basis of this paper, which examines the characterization and vitality of the ocean in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*.

Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* tells the story of Pi Patel, a young Indian boy who survives a shipwreck and spends 227 days adrift in the Pacific Ocean on a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. The story envisages themes such as survival, belief, and the harshness of reality, as Pi copes with his mordacious circumstances.

The Canadian novelist Yann Martel has forged the courageous heart of Pi Patel by pushing him into an unfathomable journey in the world's largest ocean, the Pacific, a symbol of vastness and, peculiarly, a living entity that is more than just a setting of the novel. The author has sketched the Pacific Ocean as a dynamic character, which propels the physical and spiritual development of the young protagonist. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to elucidate how the ocean is characterized throughout the novel and what emotional and narrative roles it plays. "All about me was flatness and infinity, an endless panorama of blue. There was nothing to block my view. The vastness hit me like a punch in the stomach." (LP, 213)

In the initial chapters, when Pi Patel confronts the ocean's overwhelming magnitude, he feels his efforts to survive have become quite minimal in approach in front of the "vastness" of the Pacific Ocean.

Martel portrays the Pacific Ocean as an embodiment of nature that binds Pi Patel and Richard Parker. While he develops these two characters in detail, he simultaneously presents the Pacific Ocean as an equally animate entity through vivid description and symbolic representation. "The sea roared like a tiger. The sea whispered in your ear like a friend telling you secrets." (LP, 289)

In the above context, Martel almost presents the Pacific as a tiger, which is like a second tiger after Richard Parker. As much as the tiger has its animalistic nature, the Pacific Ocean also has its own animalistic nature. Then, the ocean is portrayed as a friend who whispers secrets. This notion suggests that the Pacific Ocean, as vast as it is, tries to bond with Pi Patel by revealing secrets, almost becoming like a friend. But, slowly in the following lines, the author makes sure that the nature of the sea is a constant changer. "The sea hissed like sandpaper working on wood. The sea sounded like someone vomiting. The sea was dead silent." (LP, 289)

As the writer proceeds further, the sea is now compared to the harsh, scraping noise of sandpaper rubbing against wood, suggesting that the sea isn't calm, and again this calmness is also temporary as it keeps on changing its nature. This abrasive sound shifts to someone who is retching, making it more human-like once again. Lastly, the sea decides to stay dead silent, referring to a dormant state, almost like a sound sleep after a long day. This constant change of the ocean is synonymous with the constant change of the inner turmoil of Pi Patel.

Martel's vivid description frames the Pacific as more than a geographical expanse; rather, it is a force that challenges Pi's sense of scale, power, and identity. Thus, the ocean is presented as a living entity capable of aggression, compassion, and unpredictability.

This contradictory dual nature—an extreme extent of ferocity and a serene intimacy—positions the ocean as a second “tiger,” paralleling Richard Parker’s presence. While Richard Parker is a visible threat, the ocean becomes a more profound and omnipresent companion.

As a survivalist, Pi Patel experiences various sorts of feelings in each and every chapter. At one point, he loses all hope and determination to live when he encounters death now and then. On the other side, Pi also develops a sense of hope, a will to survive despite the odds thrown by the merciless ocean. In fact, he even seeks religious asylum by tapping his inner faith and tries to remain calm, similar to the calm sea. The inner persona of Pi Patel, controlled by the changing nature of the sea, is well-depicted by the novelist, Yann Martel. “As for the sea, it looked rough, but to a landlubber the sea is always impressive and forbidding, beautiful and dangerous.” (LP, 134)

It is not just the constantly changing nature of the great Pacific Ocean that is synonymous with the heart of Pi Patel; the wild, ruthless nature of the sea is synonymous with the animalistic nature of the Royal Bengal Tiger, Richard Parker. As it was mentioned earlier, the sea was compared to a tiger, and this Pacific Ocean as tiger humbles the other tiger, Richard Parker.

Many sea-survival stories have been told before, but Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* is definitely a different art because of the unique setting. If it was just Pi Patel in the raft, he could have survived more than 227 days, or if it was just Richard Parker, he might have died in a month or two, but bringing together these two polar-opposite species is highly outstanding from other shipwreck stories.

Naturally, the readers focus on how Pi Patel tamed Richard Parker in the middle of the Pacific, but the deeper context is that Pi did not tame the tiger; rather, the Pacific Ocean tamed Richard Parker. Throughout the novel, Martel describes the wildness of the sea as “forbidding, beautiful and dangerous,” and this also may suit the characteristic features of Richard Parker. As a predator, he realizes that he cannot hunt the ocean; rather, he knows he is powerless in front of the Pacific Ocean, just like Pi Patel. It is implicated that the tiger is aware of the necessity to exist with a human being in the raft and the best way to survive the ruthless Pacific is to work together.

The Pacific Ocean as an entity teaches Pi Patel the significance of faith in his life and the willingness to live. Before the shipwreck, Pi is painted as a young man who applies practical knowledge and rational thinking. Although he was a good swimmer and possessed tremendous knowledge of animal behaviors, due to his father’s influence and regular visits to his zoo in Pondicherry, he was not fully a devoted Hindu, nor a religious Muslim, nor a Christian as well. In fact, he believed in all three of these religions, which caused some conflict with religious leaders, whereas his family encouraged him to choose only one. “The

sea is without a wrinkle. There is not a whisper of wind. The hours last forever. You are so bored you sink into a state of apathy close to a coma.” (LP, 292)

Based on this aspect, Pi Patel, along with his fascination with all the religions and his knowledge of animals, is tested when he is stranded in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Yann Martel gives the Pacific Ocean the role of a teacher. The ocean may externally be harsh like a punisher, but internally, it teaches Pi that his place is limited in the universe despite being a knowledgeable and skilled person.

The calmness or the dormant side of the ocean drains Pi Patel’s ability to think on the steps to survive. Whenever Pi is being challenged, like a storm, or the heatstroke, or hunger, or thirst, or even taming the tiger, he manages by solving these conflicts. But when the sea is not throwing any challenges at him, he feels “bored,” and he compares this state to a “coma.” He is not comfortable with this numbness, where no good thing or bad thing happens to him, even for a while. And slowly, the ocean as a teacher teaches him the subtlety behind the nothingness of the ocean.

“What do you know about the sea? Nothing. What do I know about the sea? Nothing. Without a driver this bus is lost. Our lives are over. Come aboard if your destination is oblivion—it should be our next stop.” (LP, 146-147)

In the above context, Pi Patel clearly agrees that he knows “nothing” about the sea. The inexperienced Pi from the initial chapters might have disagreed with him, but this version of Pi, who is at the brink of death, an epitome of a survivalist, realizes that whatever he once knew, the knowledge he possessed, has become “nothing” in front of the magnanimous Pacific. Pi Patel ‘unlearns’ whatever he knew and studied and ‘learns’ the art of survival in the practical setting of the Pacific Ocean. “I caught nothing the whole day, not even in the late afternoon, when marine life appeared in abundance.” (LP, 253)

Yann Martel anthropomorphizes the Pacific Ocean by giving it a contradictory nature, which often makes the human a human being. Although Pi Patel is surrounded with an abundance of life force in the water, he sometimes has to starve without getting proper food to eat. Martel uses the phrase “sea is a city” (LP, 234) and presents the sea as a fully-functioning metropolitan city with all the resources. The sea is almost city-like, with all of its resources, fish represented like “cars” and “trucks,” according to their sizes, perhaps more lively than actual cities.

“In water that was dense, glassy and flecked by millions of lit-up specks of plankton, fish like trucks and buses and cars and bicycles and pedestrians were madly racing about, no doubt honking and hollering at each other.” (LP, 234)

Nonetheless, on some occasions, if it is destined that Pi Patel has to starve, the ocean makes sure he does. In spite of several efforts to catch a fish, he gets nothing for that day.

This perspective of the ocean suggests not merely that the ocean is toying with Pi; rather, it teaches him what is the most important factor to survive, that is patience. The Pacific Ocean teaches him the significance of patience and reveals its own complex dual nature. The ocean has the ability to give, but it chooses not to give. Martel demonstrates that the ocean has its own conscience and suggests that it may act however it wishes. “Then the sea becomes rough and your emotions are whipped into a frenzy. Yet even these two opposites do not remain distinct.” (LP, 292)

One way or another, Pi Patel learns quickly or tries to track the nature of the ocean. As much as he is successful in taming Richard Parker, Pi realizes that the sea is something he cannot tame. The ferocious nature of the ocean not only affects him mentally and physically, but also emotionally, as he is pushed in each and every hardship that the sea throws. The constant changes of night and day, joy and sorrow, famished and fed, sleepless and asleep—by using these dualities, the ocean manipulates Pi Patel and teaches him his place in the universe.

“The sea, so immense, so breathtakingly immense, was settling into a smooth and steady motion, with the waves at heel; the wind was softening to a tuneful breeze; fluffy, radiantly white clouds were beginning to light up in a vast fathomless dome of delicate pale blue. It was the dawn of a beautiful day in the Pacific Ocean.” (LP, 146)

Once Pi Patel understood the magnitude of the situation he is in, he slowly adapts himself and transforms his fellow companions as well. If the ocean is teaching him something, he does not instantly give up, nor does he try to fight back, but rather, he embraces the Pacific Ocean, even the rough side of it. It is similar to how he tames Richard Parker after several claws; similarly, he may not have tamed the ocean entirely, but surely, he must have come to terms with it. A mutual understanding and mutual respect have been attained by both Pi Patel and the great Pacific Ocean. Pi learns that he cannot do much except abide by the laws of the Pacific and slowly learn his place in the ocean. “This toy raft, mini-raft, micro-raft, might do for a pond, but not for the Pacific Ocean.” (LP, 206)

As much as he explores throughout the Pacific Ocean, Pi Patel also explores himself in his extraordinary journey. Martel makes Pi struggle a lot, to endure, and eventually to be able to find his true strength and character within himself, and in doing so, he uses the Pacific Ocean as an eventful object. And during this process, Pi Patel not only survives the Pacific Ocean, but he finds a new version of himself with more clarity and wisdom. “The blackness would stir and eventually go away, and God would remain, a shining point of light in my heart. I would go on loving.” (LP, 281)

Seeking spirituality is one of the key aspects in the novel, *Life of Pi*. Yann Martel has not pictured Pi Patel as a typical atheist who doesn't believe in God and by the end of the novel, after the shipwreck, believes in all the faiths. Instead, he sketched Pi as a profound

individual who admires, respects, and adores all the major Indian faiths like Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Before the shipwreck, his faith was divided, and he had confusion about which God he should devote himself to. But after the shipwreck, due to the bitter lessons taught by the Pacific, he made peace with his own version of God, and in his own way, he attained spirituality. Using the Pacific Ocean as a subtle entity, Yann Martel shaped Pi Patel from confused faiths to strengthening and shaping his own faith.

According to the Blue Humanities scholars Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, the ocean is not an entity; it is an extension (Steinberg & Peters, p. 295). In other words, the setting of the ocean extends characterization beyond a liquid surface, inviting the readers to experience the ocean as something much more, an inevitable persona with metaphorical and ideological depth. Thus, the novelist Yann Martel presented the Pacific Ocean as not just a tool to drive the story; rather, it is a lively character within the novel. Although it may not interact with other characters like Pi Patel and Richard Parker, the Pacific itself has an enigmatic persona, a true personification of nature with a balanced being of both a provider and a destroyer, and in conclusion, the ocean in the novel acts as a creator itself, which creates an extraordinary thrilling experience of storytelling and a dramatic narrative style. The credit shall be given to the brilliant mastermind of the novel, Yann Martel, for showcasing the might and mercy of the great Pacific Ocean, and indeed *Life of Pi* will stand firmly in the research field of Blue Humanities.

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