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## “Is there life after death?”: In search of ‘After Life’ in Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*

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**ABSTRACT**

*The most awestruck question since the beginning of recorded history, perhaps is, 'Is there life after death?' It's the eternal search of human soul on earth. Yann Martel's novel Life of Pi enchants the imagination and wakefulness of the essential impulse of life. In fact, Martel captivates the readers with a stunning story-telling and explores an 'awareness' which perhaps cannot be known but felt only. The appalling combat with hostile nature for survival forces Pito castaway at sea. It is the calamitous extent to which creatures go after facing extinction but he comes back. The miracle which Pi experiences, is beyond religious inferences or scientific rationalizations. This paper tries to explore the metaphysical existence of human soul and its bliss through the understanding of NDE.*

**Key Words:** Journey, Psycho-Neurobiology, Awareness, Emotional Equilibrium

**Introduction**

The question 'Is there life after death?' (Act III, Sc I) is not only the prolonged pondering of Hamlet, it is the timeless exploration of an endless flow. The question is as old as the first appearance of man on earth. Yann Martel in *Life of Pi* tells the story of Piscine Molitor Patel, an ingenious and devout Indian boy who suffers but endures more than seven months lost in a lifeboat on the Pacific ocean, accompanied by a royal Bengal tiger. Piscine Patel embarks on a voyage during which he is blessed with enlightenment as he goes through near death experience, which results in attaining a new awareness which uplifts him to an awakening and teaches him how to handle life's difficulties. Pi starts his journey with a crisis and quest of identity as he has exceptional mindset to associate himself with the Christian, Hindu, and Muslim religions. Since Pi does not know which religion he needs to follow, it is indispensable to experience the mystery, search soul and to reach to a decision. The consequences of a 'near death experience' are the true apprehensions of life, final realization of existence, the absolute end of a journey full of inquiry and crisis and attainment of an ultimate awakening. After Pi completes his voyage, he comes to the enlightenment that difficult situations do not remind the pages of scriptures but demand a unfathomable faith, and for Pi, it is God or '*paramsunya*' as he reflects:

I grew weary of my situation, as pointless as the weather. But life would not leave me. The rest of this story is nothing but grief, ache and endurance. High calls low and low calls high. I tell you, if you were in such dire straits as I was, you too would elevate your thoughts. The lower you are, the higher your mind will want to soar. It was natural that, bereft and desperate as I was, in the throes of the unremitting suffering, I should turn to Go (Martel 314, 315).

Martel's novel explores issues of spirituality, faith, and practicality through Pi's incredible story of survival and it unfolds a conflict which is always inside of all thoughtful minds as it is hard to let go of the safety mantle of our observation of how things are, whether we accepted that view from someplace or truly worked on it solicitously by ourselves.

**Life of Pi**

The life of Pi signifies celestial completion and immortal; the pragmatic body invokes the transcendental. This interplay of the physical and metaphysical is the philosophical base of the novel. It informs the warm aspects with which Pi convoluted his early days in the Pondicherry Zoo and illustrates both his love of animals and his search for God. The story concludes with beautiful lines of the framing narrator Okamoto,

As an aside, story of sole survivor, Mr. Piscine Molitor Patel, Indian citizen, is an astounding story of courage and endurance in the face of extraordinarily difficult and tragic circumstances. In the experience of this investigator, his story is unparalleled in the history of shipwrecks. Very few castaways can claim to have survived so long at sea as Mr. Patel, and none in the company of an adult Bengal tiger. (Martel, 2003, p. 319)

But what exactly Pi experienced on his prolonged resistance on sea. He narrates,

The first time I tried, Richard Parker bared his teeth, rotated his ears full round, vomited a short guttural roar and charged. A great full-clawed paw rose in the air and cuffed my shield. The blow sent me flying off the boat. I hit the water and instantly let go of the shield. It sank without a trace after hitting me in the shin. I was beside myself with terror- of Richard Parker, but also of being in the water. In my mind a shark was at that very second shooting up for me. (Martel, 2003, p. 228)

He also states:

Nature was sinking fast. I could feel a fatal weakness creeping up on me. I would be dead by the afternoon. To make my going more comfortable I decided to put off a little intolerable thirst I had been living with for so long. I gulped down as much water as I could take. If only I could have had a last bite to eat. (Martel, 2003,p. 242)

Pi accepts that he experiences near death when he makes these statements,

Goodbye, Richard Parker. I'm sorry for having failed you. I did my best. Farewell. Dear Father, dear Mother, dear Ravi, greetings. Your loving son and brother is coming to meet you...And now I leave matters in the hands of God, who is love and whom I love"

(Martel, 2003, p. 269).

Pi remembers the moment when he is about to die, "By the next morning I had lost all fear of death, and I resolved to die."(Martel241) Pi Patel has just gone sightless and has lost all trust. He is at his lowest point and it is at this moment that he is closest to death. His blindness, helplessness, surrender, nearness to death, his reminiscence of departed family members and mental association with them and coming back to life in a composed and transformed form- all stimulate the thought to search after life.

### **The Vedanta Philosophy**

The writings of the early prophets of truth in India were the awareness of pre-existence, permanence and immortality of the human soul. The prayers of the *Rig Veda* prove the existence of the soul after death and eternal life. In the *Isha-Upanishad* of the Sukla-Yajur-Veda, it is written,

"Oh God! Take me there where lies the source of everlasting light of the universe, which is indestructible, where immortality reigns supreme and make me immortal." (Isha Upanishad, 1.18 (Chapter 1, Verse No. 18)

In a funeral hymn it is read:

"Go forth, go forth on these ancient paths on which our forefathers departed, having left all sins, go home again and radiant in thy body, come together with them." (Rig Veda, 10th Mandala (Chapter), Sukta (Section) 14, Verse No. 7.)

The Greek philosophers, Pythagoras, Plato and their followers believed in the perpetual existence of the soul and in the theory of transmigration. Carrington and Meader explain in their book, *Death, Its Causes and Phenomena*,

It might be possible for this departing soul to manifest itself to its friends, either in the immediate vicinity, or even at a distance ... manifestations of the departing spirit, at the moment of death, are by no means uncommon, but are, on the contrary, very numerous." (pg. 382)

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, it is said:

“The soul of man is indestructible; it cannot be pierced by sword; fire cannot burn it; air cannot dry it; water cannot moisten it.” (*Bhagavad Gita*, Chapter 2, Verses 23 and 24)

The Hindus believe that soul is beyond birth or death and they do not mean demolition or annihilation by death.

Thought or feeling or intelligence, according to the Vedanta philosophy, can never be formed by any automatic or molecular motion. The motion of the atoms of the body cannot produce consciousness. Due to some lighter power or force, human consciousness is made and this force is usually called the ‘soul’. The soul cannot be the subject to the atomic or molecular transformations in the body rather it is the cause of them. It is beyond all changes and thus, is beyond death. Soul helps the ‘conscious state’ to continue perpetually and it renders sense of self in the individual too. In the *Bhagavad Gita* it is said:

As during our lifetime we survive the death of the baby body, the young body, and the mature body successively and retain our individuality, so after the death of the old body we shall survive, live, retain our individuality and continue to exist through eternity. (*Bhagavad Gita* Chapter 2, Verse 13)  
So which has birth must die, and that which is dead must be born again but there is no birth or death in the soul life as it is eternal and immortal.

### Conclusion

The conflicting, empirical, and inspirational tale of endurance provides the essence of truth. The option is always there whether people wish to be the agnostic and refuse to believe the eternal truth or to apprehend it. The choice to believe is ultimately a choice made against what Pi refers to as the “dry, yeastless factuality” (Martel, 2003, p. 302) of predictable believability. It is the choice of ‘the better story’—that story which offers the simple but life-sustaining element of hope. Pi’s confrontation with death, his acceptance of the existence of an ultimate power beyond all religious scriptures, a divine transformation all prove that the NDEs rejuvenate society’s faith in God and hope for an afterlife. Fox reflects, “NDEs cannot unambiguously be used as apologetic tools for the propagation of any one particular religious or spiritual tradition or be somehow fitted into any one tradition to the exclusion of all others” (Fox, 2003, p. 339). Pi’s experience compels the readers to meditate and foster spiritual growth. It questions some of our fundamental postulations about mind and brain, about our bond with the divine, and about the cosmos and our part in it. Perhaps, it’s better to consider that the unconscious consciousness believes in ‘life after death’.

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