



TRANS-RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS IN *LIFE OF PI*

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Abstract

People today, despite age-old rationalist thoughts and their influences, seem to be caught in the ritualistic religiosity and its practices which differ in their external patterns among religions, yet deep down resemble one another closely in what they preach and promote as high ideals. What is witnessed as the worse phenomenon even today is that in the name of religions, many of the so-called learned people and experienced politicians are divided and un-conscientiously divide the illiterate masses, which / who in turn, blindly trapped in religious trances, bleed and let others bleed for religions' sake. There is a blatant need for people today to move beyond the 'trance-religiosity' (irrational religious sense and practice) into a trans-religious consciousness (seeing truth across all religions) in which one can virtually experience the ideals preached by many religions. The current article is a study of how the protagonist in *Life of Pi* is trans-religious, i.e., moving beyond the boundaries of individual religions and accepting the common ideals like Love and Compassion found across and promoted by all religions. It is obvious textually and experientially that such trans-religious consciousness establishes peace in individuals and society.

Key Words: *Trans-religiosity, trance-religiosity, Consciousness, Cosmic Encounter, Peace.*

1. Introduction: Yann Martel And *Life Of Pi*

Yann Martel was born to Canadian parents in Spain in 1963. He took to the study of philosophy after which to took up odd jobs and travelled widely. With rich experiences he turned to writing. Besides his booker-prize winning *Life of Pi*, he has written other novels like *Self* and *Beatrice and Virgil*. *Life of Pi* is a story of one boy, one boat and one tiger. After a shipwreck, a solitary lifeboat is left at the mercy of the wild blue waters of the Pacific. The only survivors are a sixteen year old boy named Pi, a zebra with a broken leg, a hyena, an orangutan and a 450 pound royal Bengal tiger. The life of Pi on the boat in the midst of animals is breathtaking. The novel opens and closes with how Pi grows in the midst of diverse religions and their influence. The current article illustrates how Pi transcends the boundaries of separate religions and grows trans-religious and practises all religions in peace and harmony.

2. Trance-religiosity to Trans-religiosity

The word 'trance' means 'half-conscious state' (Soanes 1530) in which one does not reason out or respond normally. We come across trance-dance in rural festivals when a person experiences a divine power come over him and dances in an excited and inebriated condition in which one would not be able to reason out things. People drunk with religious fundamentalism are equal to these trance dancers. 'Trans' means "'across' 'through' 'beyond'" (1530), etc. The values found across religions are love, compassion and God. When a person travels across many religions and imbibes the religious ideals common to many religions, then he matures into wisdom and becomes a harbinger of harmony. If religious fundamentalists are able to move beyond this un-reasonable state into transcendental state, then there would be peace and harmony in them and in the society. Pi has a transcendental experience through many religions.

Piscine Molitor Patel, Pi, encounters Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and imbibes the positive features, sees the commonality in them and follows them all. In his following all the three religions, he comes in conflict with the narrowness of established religions and their defenders. He moves beyond the narrow-mindedness of the Institutionalized religions and becomes trans-religious, cosmic and confluence of all religious ideals. The maturing process of his trans-religious consciousness is captured below.

2.1. Searching Adolescent

Pi as a small boy and a teenager has an inherent search which impels him to move beyond the regular ordinary life into one of ardent search. He meets people of diverse interests and jobs, encounters leaders of many religions, and grows through every encounter and experience. This section captures how Pi matures through enlightening exposures to various religious traditions.

Well-Contented Hindu: Pi manifests an inherent search in his character. With that impelling search, he moves to other religions, not with any discontentment or disillusionment with Hinduism. Actually, he is a contented Hindu. When he happens to be in Madurai as a small boy, he is gladly initiated by Aunt Rohini into Hindu worship: "Going around a temple - smelling the incense - the flames - the colours - the sultriness - the mystery of the place." This "germ of religious exaltation"



(Martel 47) remains fresh with him till the end of his life. The Kumkum, the turmeric, garlands, coconut, nadaswaram, drum, arati, bhajans, all these become part of his faith.

Impelled from within, he realizes that "religion is more than rite and ritual" (48) as he grows to distinguish between Nirguna and Saguna Brahman. While Nirguna Brahman refers to God without specific qualities but understood as Truth, One, Unity, Reality, etc., Saguna Brahman refers to God with specific qualities with names and forms such as Shiva, Krishna, Shakti with attributes like "loving, merciful, frightening," (48) etc. With this realization, he takes a trans-religious position that at Nirguna stage all religions understand God as one and the same whereas in Saguna stage each religion gives differing names and forms to God. And that is where the conflict begins.

In his trans-religious mindset, Pi realizes that "'Brahman - atman' relate in a way that 'Father-Son-Holy Spirit' relate" (49). 'atman' is the microcosm of 'Brahman' the macrocosm. 'Son' is the microcosm of the 'Father' the macrocosm. 'Holy Spirit' is the microcosm of both 'Father' and 'son' the macrocosm. The ultimate goal of every atman is to merge with Brahman, as it is the destiny of every creature to "return to the Father" (Eph 1:10). In his trans-religious consciousness, Pi sees Hindus as Christians, Christians as Muslims, and Muslims as Hindus: "Hindus in their capacity for love are indeed hairless Christians, just as Muslims in the way they see God in everything are bearded Hindus, and Christians in their devotion to God are hat-wearing Muslims" (Martel 50).

Christian in Heart

Pi's first encounter with a Christian priest in Munnar, Kerala alters his earlier prejudices about Christianity as severe and violence-ridden. With the priest being "serene, open, patient, ... listening with love and care"(52), Pi experiences a deep sense of peace inside the church. As he spends more time with priests and gets to know of Christianity and Christ, there arise some questions in his mind like: "Humanity sins but it's God's son who pays the price? God is world soul. How can His Avatar die? God should be power, might, shine, not dirty, mortal and suffering ..." (53-54). Eventual meetings with priests bring him clarity and conviction over the humanity of Jesus, which draws him close to Christianity. In his trans-religious consciousness, Pi sees Krishna's divinity and Jesus' humanity merging into one. Pi feels a Christian in his heart, meeting "Christ in good faith" (57) and Fr Martin testifies it.

Muslim in Worship

Pi's encounter with Satish Kumar a Muslim Sufi mystic, professionally a Baker, enlightens him to the true Muslim world. His prejudices against Islam as a violence-ridden religion change and he realizes that Islam is a "beautiful religion of brotherhood and devotion in spirit" (61). Pi often joins Kumar in worship and feels within him a "deep religious contact, ... a communion with God"(61, 60). He senses Kumar's place as more sacred than even temple, mosque and church. One of those evenings, Pi feels as if in heaven when, "the road, the sea, the trees, the air, the sun, all spoke ... one language of unity" (62) and he sees Atman in Allah and at the same time he sees Virgin Mary. St. Ignatius' vision of finding God in "the elements, creatures, plants, animals, human beings" (Ganss 95) materializes in Pi. In his trans-religious consciousness, all images of God merge into one. When the priest, Imam and the pandit claim him to their religion, Pi transcendently declares, "I am a practising Hindu, Christian and Muslim"(64). He worships God inside, in truth and spirit (Jn 4:23). He becomes religious in his consciousness, not bound to a particular religion.

2.2. Cosmic Encounter

After the wreck, Pi is left alone in the boat in the company of a tiger. He gradually gets accustomed to handling the tiger, Richard Parker. But he is fully aware of his state, one that of an anawim - "one who depends on God" (Leon-Defour 436). He is at the mercy of the sea and the tiger. When hailstorms hit them repeatedly, he feels a total helplessness which disposes him spontaneously to see the "Tremendous Reality" in the cosmos, the "outbreak of divinity" (Martel 233). He surrenders to God immanent and transcendent in the cosmos and feels an integral part of it.

2.3. Settled Adult: Trans-religious Confluence

Pi after rich experiences with the three major religions of the world and their leaders, and the cosmic encounter in the sea, settles in Canada wherein he has a house which he has designed as a symbol of trans-religious consciousness, an abode of religious confluence, a home of peace and harmony attained through ideals found across all religions. A framed picture of Ganesha hangs at the entrance. He brings good luck, wisdom and learning to the house-occupants. A Plain wooden cross is fixed opposite Ganesha. A Picture of Virgin Mary is kept in the living room, filling the house with cosmic feminine fragrance. Next to Mary is 'black-robbed kaaba' (Sanctum of Islam). A statue of Nataraja shines in dancing pose on the television set. Shiva, Shakti, Virgin Mary, Arabic letters (46) are found together in the kitchen and dining hall. This immense religious diversity gives a deep inner harmony to Pi. He is at home with all manifestations of ONE GOD. His trans-religious



consciousness gifts him with innermost peace and harmony he has been paving way for all along his life since his boyhood days.

3. Conclusion

Going from one religion to another is like shifting from one path to another. Way leads on to way. Combining ways is wisdom. Denying one God and aggressively asserting another, is denying part of God. To experience harmony and peace in the society, individuals need not go beyond religions, but across religions and accommodate all. All religions have truth in them as all religions point to God who is one but perceived as many by human eye. In the path of Pi, trans-religious approach resulting in trans-religious consciousness helps individuals and society experience peace and harmony, the desired end of all.

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