

The Heroic Pattern in *Life of Pi*

Yann Martel's novel, *Life of Pi*, won the 2002 Man Booker Prize, and was adapted into a 3D film by director Ang Lee in 2012. Both the novel and the film got international acclaim with the touching theme of faith and spiritual growth. In an interview, Martel himself emphasized the importance of faith. Even in period of want, he insisted that people be driven by art and religion, which are the engines of our life (Martel 2010).

Pi was a 16-year-old Indian boy embracing three religions: Hinduism, Catholicism and Islam. He changed his name from Piscine to Pi to avoid his schoolmates' teasing of the similarity between "Piscine" and "pissing." The name also has symbolic meanings. For one thing, Pi is the 16th letter of the Greek alphabet, which corresponds to Pi's age. It's also a mathematical term for 3.14 or $22/7$, and 227 is the period his ordeals last. Political turmoil forced his family to leave India for Canada. The cargo ship sank on the Pacific and Pi was the sole survivor together with a zebra, hyena, orangutan and tiger, which were to be sold to foreign zoos. The hyena quickly devoured the zebra and orangutan, and was in turn eaten by the tiger. Pi was left alone with the tiger named Richard Parker. Dominating it was the only way he could survive. And he did succeed in controlling Richard Parker by offering it food and water, establishing himself as a circus master to tame the wild animal. A subtle relationship thus developed between him and the tiger, one that was made up of love and fear. Pi's lifeboat finally landed on the Mexican coast. He was rescued and Richard Parker disappeared into the forest.

Pi's struggle for life is the main focus of this novel. Scientific perspectives of the Japanese investigators invalidated some parts of his story. For example, the taming of the tiger was regarded "incredible" (Martel 2002, 372); the meeting of two blind people in two separate lifeboats were "unlikely" (Martel 2002, 376) and "extremely hard to believe" (Martel 2002, 377); the isolated island with carnivorous trees, fish-eating algae and tree-dwelling meerkats was "botanically impossible" (Martel 2002, 371). Yet, as Pi argued, he was justified to make up his stories since reason could not account for them: "Every single thing I value in life has been destroyed. And I am allowed no explanation? I am to suffer hell without any account from heaven? In that case, what is the purpose of reason? Is it no more than to shine at practicalities—the getting of food, clothing and shelter? Why can't reason give greater answers?" (Martel 2002, 122) The critic James Wood (2002) considered *Life of Pi* a "delegate for magic realism" to make readers believe in God. Despite the grand theme of faith, he argued, it is a commonplace story full of shipwreck conventions. Wood is not the only critic

to give *Life of Pi* a lukewarm evaluation. It is regarded as a “fishy tale” offering practical advice in shipwreck (Adams 2002). Another critic labelled it an “edge-of-seat” adventure with survival tips (Jordan 1984). While the critics centered on the style and subject, this research tries to unveil some other significant aspects of the novel ignored by them. Analyzing *Life of Pi* as a mythological hero’s adventure, this paper highlights it as a mirror reflecting universal human conditions. Put in the framework of hero archetype theorized by Campbell, Pi is a hero who undergoes the departure, initiation and return cycle. The Pacific Ocean is not merely the site where the shipwreck happened and left him an orphan. It will be illustrated as the magic realm where the hero experiences trials and finally becomes enlightened. His drifting on the sea, while scientifically implausible, is psychologically valid and realistic. Pi’s story proclaims Martel’s idea of fiction in the author’s note; that is, what fiction is about is the twisting of reality to “bring out its essence” (Martel 2002, vi).

Hero Archetype

Recognized as a leading authority on mythology, Joseph Campbell is best known for writing *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In this major work, he identifies the general pattern of adventures that most heroes undergo: departure from the everyday world, initiation into a dark and mysterious state of awareness through trials and ordeals, and a triumphant return in which the gifts of this experience are bestowed upon humanity. Examples of this heroic cycle may be found in the wealth of knowledge that Buddha brought to the Orient, the commandments that Moses brought back to the Occident, and the fire that Prometheus stole from Heaven to the Greeks. The three main stages of separation-initiation-return are further elaborated as follows.

For the stage of departure, a dilemma occurs in the hero’s life and causes stress. Then, something crucial happens, forcing the hero to face the change. Fearing the unknown, the hero tries to flee the adventure, however briefly. According to Campbell (1968, 62), the refusal to take the adventure is essentially the hero’s refusal to give up his own interest. It means his unwillingness to forego his present system of ideals, virtues and goals. Yet, this attempt to fix and secure the old values turns out futile. Later, some spiritual guide will appear, giving the hero equipment or advice that will help on the journey. Or the hero reaches within to a source of courage and wisdom. Fully prepared, the hero now commits to leaving the ordinary world and entering a new region or condition with unfamiliar rules and values.

The second stage is the hero’s initiation. This is the part when the hero enters a wonder world and confronts death or faces his greatest fear: “Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves