

A Postcolonial Reading of *The Life of Pi*

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Abstract

The paper explores the aftermath of colonization as depicted in the novel Life of Pi. The novel written by Yann Martel divulges the life of the orient in three different settings. First one is in a man-made jungle, Zoo, second is in the incredible islands that are hidden in the womb of the ocean and it ends in the new dream land, Canada. Patel's counter part is a Bengal Tiger, Richard Parker who parts him when he touches the beaches of Canada. Post colonialism works at different levels in the story. Primarily writer's views about a family that travels from Pondicherry to Canada, both the places are highly influenced by French culture and language. Yann Martel, a Francophone in Canada pens the feelings of Indians who were caught up in the two worlds-a world which was their very own untainted by the cultural and religious practices of the occident and a new world that was dished out to them by the colonial masters who finally left them unable to return to the old order and erase the new order. The novel is a classic example to examine the concepts of hybridity, alienation, identity crisis, mimicry and amour propre. It sketches the story of the aspirations and habitual leanings of the orient in a world where animality is juxtaposed with humanity.

Keywords: Hybridity, Mimicry, Post Colonialism, Alienation, Terra Nullis, Amour Propre

Post colonialism is a movement that gained currency in the latter half of twentieth century. It refers to the unshakable influence of colonizers on the race, ethnicity, culture, language, tradition and religion of the colonies. Identity crisis, alienation and hybridity are the terms associated with the movement. Postcolonial literature portrays characters who are caught up in two different worlds. It is impossible for them to erase the imprints of colonial masters. They learn to curse the colonizer but in the language of the colonizer.

Edward Said in his book 'Orientalism' pioneered the theory of postcolonialism. It is not possible to separate the word post and colonialism with a hyphen because it is a continuous process. Though it is divided into different periods as colonial and postcolonial period to mark the separation. Realistically speaking it is impossible to bifurcate time. Even before the orient realized, he assimilated the tradition, cultural practices and language of the occident. Said underlies that 'amour propre' is one of the key reasons for the development of colonization. It satisfied their desire for power.

Postcolonial literature explores the stereotypical boundaries that remain hidden; but undeniable between the occident and the Orient. Postcolonial literature analyses the dehumanization of the colonized by the colonial masters and it tries to see behind the veil and projects the 'us' and the 'other' relationship. An attempt has been made to unveil the hidden agenda of Post colonialism in *The Life of Pi*

The Life of Pi is authored by Yann Martel. He is a Canadian of French heritage; a francophone that is a person of Canadian citizenship who speaks in French. Canada and Australia are considered to be settler colonies. The concept of 'settler Colonialism' was developed by Lorenzo Veracini. Settler colonialism means establishing in a place permanently not just for trade or commercial purpose. Indigenous people are categorized as aborigines. The white masters eliminate the indigenous people completely and assert sovereignty over the land by establishing false structures and self-imposed codes. Terra Nullis is the concept developed to justify the self-aggrandizements of colonizers who were usually Europeans. The colonized experience alienation and unable to define the new identity as an aftermath of the hybridity that has crept into their lives on its own. They mimic the life styles of the English but there is a reversal in the position so that the powerful turns out to be the dictator and the common man, the receiver so it can be inferred that one of the direct results of colonialism is Neocolonialism

Yann Martel partakes the French heritage that was established in Canada from 17th century. Even the name Canada is a contribution of The French. *The life of Pi* is a story of a family who migrates from India to Canada in the Post-Independent Period. Rudyard Kipling told the story of Mowgli who was lost in the uncouth jungle, here Yann Martel pens the story of Piscine Molitor Patel who copes with a Bengal tiger in the sea for almost 270 days. He was named after one of the most beautiful swimming pool of France, it seems that a man from Pondicherry, a French colony till 1954 could not deny to be allured by anything French even

if it is the name of a swimming pool in France even though the name sounds absurd and sometimes obscene as the protagonist ultimately clips his name to Pi.

The novel has multiple perspectives. The perspective of the Indian family who leaves India unable to bear the Indian administration in search of greener pastures to Canada from Pondicherry itself unfolds the Occidental perspective that a better life can be promised only by the white. The Patel family had a zoo. The relationship between the animals and the owner is similar to that between the colonized and the colonizer. Just as the owner feels that the animals cannot live outside the comfort zone of zoo, the colonizer asserts that it is his duty to civilize the uncouth for a better life. Perspectives of Pi Patel about religion and society are conveyed through the symbols of zoo and various animals in the zoo.

Religion and codes of society stand for civilization so naturally an orient can understand and explain these concepts only through animal symbols. They left Pondicherry in a Japanese ship which later capsized. It intends to say that technical perfection is beyond the capacity of the orient. The story strikes certain codes of similarity with Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. But he manages to establish a society, civilization and his man, Friday; name and fame followed but an orient's story is different. He somehow manages to reach his coveted Paradise. His story is incredible just like his nation. It's not possible for an orient to overcome the vagaries of life alone so Pi Patel is forced to cook up a convincing story for the insurance agents.

He settles in Canada and he accepts his new identity, creates his new family and is no longer interested to return to his roots. Of course, he still follows the same religion and food habits but he holds on to the new culture or perhaps that same culture that to some extent gave him the solace of the colonial world when he lived because the new Pondicherry cannot be 'his space' that was once mellowed by the pastel colours of the continent so he moved on to Canada.

Patel's only angst is about Richard Parker who vanished into the jungles of Mexico forever. His broodings that despite his love Richard Parker left him without even a proper farewell again uncovers the master slave relationship in a colonial world. Just like the colonial master who expects the colonized to be loyal for their survival to the European master, Pi expects the tiger to be loyal to him.

Postcolonialism works at two different levels in the novel. Writer's narrative strategy mirrors his perspective of the orient and Pi's perspective about the Bengal Tiger symbolizes colonizer-colonized relationship. Pi Patel's family could not acclimatize with the new administrative situation that developed in India after the French retreat from India. Times turned out to be unfavorable so they were forced to leave their own soil. The characters experience alienation in the hands of their own rulers because French practices and way of life has become their own for the people of Pondicherry. Even though they followed all religious and ritual practices Pondicherry has so many indelible marks left by the French including the life style so they were completely alienated from the rest of India. It still remains as a union territory indulging in French cuisines and French language.

Pi and Richard Parker also mirrors master slave relationship. He wants the tiger to be alive so that he has a companion simultaneously he feels it is not possible to have an egalitarian relationship with the barbarian; it may be a risk to his territorial predominance. So, he establishes his authority in the life boat. Pi carves a niche of his own in Canada. They are from two different race but he wants the company of the tiger to annuls his loneliness superficially and to gratify his 'amour propre' incognitively. 'Amour propre' means power for the sake of power. Richard Parker was protected by Patel. Patel fed him and took care but he felt happy for being able to keep a Bengal Tiger at his whims and fancies. Tiger experienced the trauma of being subjugated eventhough it obeyed to its master who feeds and protects him. It did not attack but it escaped into the unknown as soon as it got a chance. Tiger ,being a powerful animal lacks the trait of being subjugated so it never returned to Pi like a loyal cat or dog; the writer intends to say perhaps it is not possible for the once colonized to completely shake off the colonial pasthis only option is to create a space of his own that could accommodate both the cultures of the occident and the orient. Simultaneously, it never urges to return to the colonial past but a new identity which has the remnants of the past still a new dawn; a new world.

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