

# Life of Pi: An ecocritical Analysis

## Abstract:

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view. It deals with how environmental issues, cultural issues concerning the environment and attitudes towards nature are presented and analysed. One of the main goals in ecocriticism is to study how individuals in society behave and react in relation to nature and ecological aspects.

Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* demonstrates the relationship between man and nature in several ways. The novel is set mainly on the Pacific Ocean. It is reminiscent of ecosystem. The novel encompasses rich and pictorial descriptions of seascape, marine life, dolphins, birds, albatrosses, a short-tailed shearwater, masked boobies; vivid descriptions of weather, rain, storms, blasts, thunder, lightning and a carnivorous island - a floating organism of algae of leviathan proportions. The order of this ecosystem in and on the sea is destroyed by man who pours tons of waste materials on the sea shores surrounding big towns and capitals. This research article analyses Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* from an ecocritical perspective.

## Life of Pi: An ecocritical Analysis

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view. It deals with how environmental issues, cultural issues concerning the environment and attitudes towards nature are presented and analysed. One of the main goals in ecocriticism is to study how individuals in society behave and react in relation to nature and ecological aspects. This research article analyses Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* from an ecocritical perspective. The novel *Life of Pi* demonstrates the relationship between man and nature in several ways. The novel is set mainly on the Pacific Ocean. It is reminiscent of ecosystem. The novel encompasses rich and pictorial descriptions of seascape, marine life, dolphins, birds, albatrosses, Wilson's petrels, a short-tailed shearwater, masked boobies; vivid descriptions of weather, rain, storms, blasts, thunder, lightning and a carnivorous island - a floating organism of algae of leviathan proportions. The order of this ecosystem in and on the sea is destroyed by man who pours tons of waste materials on the sea shores surrounding big towns and capitals. He illustrates the conception of interconnectedness through the natural cycle of 'food chain'. The hyena eats the zebra and the orangutan on the lifeboat and in turn she is eaten by Richard Parker, the tiger. Mr. Pi spends 227 days with a ferocious tiger, on a rough and stormy ocean and a carnivorous island without potable water and food but learns how to survive in adverse environment. This underscores man's integration with nature. The term 'ecocriticism' became a movement in 1990s. In 1992 a new association ASLE was formed under the leadership of Scott Slovic. The purpose of this association was to study relations between human beings and the natural world; and to encourage new nature writing which is traditional and innovative. Hence, ecocriticism is the study of relationship between literature and environment, that is application of ecological concepts to the study of literature. He states that 'portion of the grounds of the Pondicherry Botanical Garden was made available rent free for an exciting business opportunity and India had a brand new zoo... (12). Pi's father Mr. Santhosh Patel, who was a hotelier in Madras, entered the zoo business because of his abiding interest in animals. Describing the zoo Pi states: It was a huge zoo, spread over numberless acres, big enough to require a train to explore it... the riot of flowers is incessant. There are trees, shrubs and climbing plants in profusion - peepuls, gulmohors, flames or the forest, red silk cotton, jacarandas, mangoes, jack fruits and many others that would remain unknown to you if they didn't have neat labels at their feet. And when you turn your head you see the elephant that was there all along, so big you didn't notice it. And in the pond you realize those are hippopotamuses floating in the water. The more you look the more you see. You are in Zootown (12-13.) Mr Pi has sweet memories of growing up in a zoo in the enviable company of zoo animals such as lions, monkeys, mynahs, Moluccan cockatoos, American bison, yawning orangutans, shiny frogs and a number of species of birds such as pink flamingoes or black swans, or one — watt led cassowaries, silver diamond doves, cape glossy starlings, peach-faced love-birds, Nanday conures and orange fronted parakeets. There are also seals, the big cats, bears, baboons, macaques, mangabeys, gibbons, deer, tapirs, llamas, giraffes and mongooses, were early risers. Visiting a zoo, according to Pi, at sunrise and sunset accords the greatest sensory pleasure: In zoos, as in nature, the best times to visit are sunset and sunrise. That is when most animals come to life. They stir and leave their shelter and tip-toe to the water's edge.

They show their raiments. They sing their songs. They turn to each other and perform their rites. The reward for the watching eye and the listening ear is great. I spent more hours than I can count a quiet witness to the highly mannered, manifold expressions of life that grace our planet. It is smell: so bright, loud, weird and delicate as to stupefy the senses (15.) Pi believes that people have a wrong notion about zoos as they have about God and religion. They think that animals are happier and freer in the wild than in the zoo. Pi is of the view that like human beings, animals are 'territorial'. Only a familiar territory will allow them to fulfill the two relentless imperatives of the wild: the avoidance of enemies and getting the food and water. A house is a compressed territory where our basic needs can be fulfilled close by and safely. A zoo is a place of 'plenty' and safety for animals. They feel 'happy', contented and relaxed in a zoo. The animal lovers may not buy this idea. Pi makes insightful comments on the behavior of man towards animals. He states that we commonly say in the trade that the most dangerous animal in the zoo is man" (29). Man is predatory by nature and through this quality has made the entire planet his prey. The most burning question today is the cruelty of man towards flora and fauna. Pi gives graphic details of this cruelty in the following excerpt. ...we have in mind the people who feed fishhooks to the otters, razors to the bears, apples with small nails in them to the elephants and hardware variations on the theme: ballpoint pens, paper clips, safety pins, rubber bands, combs, coffee spoons, brooders, drinking straws, plastic and so on. The obituary of zoo animals that have died being fed foreign bodies would include gorillas, bison, storks, rheas, ostriches, seals, sea lions, big cats, bears, camels, elephants, monkeys, and most every variety of deer, ruminant and songbird. Among zookeepers,

Goliath's death is famous, he was a bull elephant seal, a great big venerable beast of two tons, star of European zoo, loved by all visitors. He died of internal bleeding after someone fed him a broken beer bottle (29.)

Zoo-keeping is a brilliant example of interrelationship between man and animals. Visiting zoos emphasizes our love for animals. Watching animal behavior, habitat and their flight distances, territoriality- all show that we want to live in peaceful co-existence with fauna in the ecosystem. In zoo keeping, it is economics that interacts between the relationship of man and animals. Man imprisons animals in a zoo, tearing them away from their natural habitat to earn money. It is a business tactics to enslave animals and cannot be called an ethical act at all. Zoo visitors (most of them though) go to the zoo out of curiosity; they want to see the animals and study their behavior. As described by Pi that some of them perform cruelty towards them, which is not pardonable.

The argument of Pi is that zoo is a place of plenty and security. Pi treats them the other and enslaves them for his entertainment. This approach of humanbeings instead of creating a balance in environment creates a fissure and cannot be defined in any case. Further, all animals except guinea pigs have been described as dangerous by Pi's father. This anthropomorphous view of animals is a part of man's assertion of power over animals who are a very important part of ecosystem.

Pi expounds the notion of interconnectedness between various objects of nature through the natural cycle of 'food-chain'. food-chain is the flow of energy from one organism to the next. Organisms in a food chain are grouped into trophic levels and mesh, based on how many levels they are removed from the primary producers. They usually start with primary producers and end with a carnivore. The base of a food-chain is phytoplankton, by the virtue of their ability to photo-synthesize. The food chain shows only one pathway of energy and material transfer. Most consumers feed on multiple species and are in turn fed upon by multiple other species.

The food chain has a producer, consumer, herbivore, carnivore, and 'decomposer'. There are three types of consumers: primary, secondary and tertiary. Eventually this transfer of energy ends with decomposers (dead animals) that are broken down and used as food or nutrition by bacteria or fungi. Pi describes an interesting case in the zoo in which the predator- prey relationship was temporarily suspended but ultimately it was restored proclaiming the continuation of food-chain:

Pi, travelling by ship named as Tsitsum to Canada with his family and a few zoo animals, realized that the ship was sinking. He found it as 'unbelievable as the moon catching fire'. He found himself alone and orphaned in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, hanging to an oar, an adult tiger in front of him sharks beneath him. He was in the lifeboat and along with him were Richard Parker (a tiger) a zebra, a hyena, and the Orange Juice, a female orangutan.

Pi draws a separate territory for himself and Richard Parker very intelligently. He finds ways not to let the tiger enter his territory. Both Pi and Richard Parker live on different kind of sea-life for their sustenance:

Richard Parker turned and started clawing the shark's head with his free front paw and biting it with his jaws, while his rear legs began tearing at its stomach and back. The shark held on to his paw, its only line of defence and attack, and thrashed its tail. Tiger and shark twisted and tumbled about. With great effort I managed to gain enough control of my body to get into the raft and release it. The lifeboat drifted away. I saw flashes of orange and deep blue, or fur and skin, as the lifeboat rocked from side to side. Richard Parker's snarling was simply terrifying (220.)

After the hardship of a number of days, Pi happens to see a fresh water pond. He touches an island which is six or seven miles in diameter. This island is not an island in the conventional sense of the term- that is a small land mass rooted to the floor of the ocean- but is rather a free- floating organism a ball of algae of leviathan proportions. On this strange island trees grow directly out of vegetation without any soil. Pi and Richard Parker stay here for a time, sleeping in their boat and exploring the island during the day. Pi discovers a huge colony of meerkats who sleep in the trees and fresh water ponds. One day, Pi finds human teeth in a tree's fruit and comes to the conclusion that the island eats people. He and Richard Parker head back out to sea, finally reaching a Mexican beach. Richard Parker runs off, and villagers take Pi to hospital. Pi describes the carnivorous island in the following words: The island was carnivorous. This explained the disappearance of fish in the pond. The island attracted salt water fish in to its subterranean tunnels- how I don't know; perhaps fish ate the algae as gluttonously as I did. They became trapped. Did they lose their way? Did the openings onto the sea close off? Did the water change salinity so subtly that it was too late by the time the fish realized it? Whatever the case, they found themselves trapped in water and died. Some floated up to the surface of the ponds, the scraps that fed the meerkats. At night, by some chemical process unknown to me but obviously inhabited by sunlight, the predatory algae turned highly acidic and the ponds became vats of acid that digested the fish. This was why Richard Parker returned the boat every night. This was why the meerkats slept in the trees. This was why I had never seen anything but algae on the island (281-82.) The description of this carnivorous algae is another illustrious example of food chain in nature. The description of a murderous island is not a piece of fantasy. Science Reporter (July 2008) discusses such strange plants called 'bladderwre ( a water plant ) which sits in the water and traps its prey and then proceeds to eat it.

There is another reason for a peaceful living between Pi and Richard Parker, It is Pi, who made arrangement for Richard Parker's food and water. Pi, the castaway, finds himself in grim and exhausting opposites. The stranded person or living creature has to make adjustments if one wants to survive. One gets one's happiness where one can. One reaches a point where one is at the bottom of hell, yet one has one's arms crossed and a smile on one's face, and one feels that one is the luckiest person on earth. Pi says that life goes on because nature understands that human life should be provided for it. This interconnectedness between man and nature and underscores their everlasting relationship.

There is beauty, splendor and presence of opposites such as smoothness vs roughness; sea of tranquility vs tumultuousness in the ocean but Pi learns to merge and adjust himself even in an antagonistic atmosphere of the sea. In fact, what appears to be opposites in nature are different facets of nature. Man has to learn to adjust himself to them to live peacefully.

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