

Original Paper

Navigating Liminal Spaces: The Study of the Diasporic Identity in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

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Received: July 31, 2025

Accepted: August 20, 2025

Online Published: September 4, 2025

doi:10.22158/sll.v9n3p143

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v9n3p143>

Abstract

Yann Martel's Life of Pi reflects a diasporic Indian boy's transnational experiences from India to Canada. This paper reads the novel as an immigrant narrative in a framework of liminality and diaspora, explores how post-colonial immigrants construct their hybrid, fluid and dynamic national identity in a multicultural society. Through an examination of Pi's diasporic emotions and agency in the liminal spaces of Pondicherry and the lifeboat, this paper highlights the struggles and aspirations of Indian immigrants, illustrating Martel's engagement with multiculturalism and his reflections on constructing multicultural identities for contemporary immigrants from the Third World.

Keywords

Yann Martel, Life of Pi, diaspora, liminality, national identity, fluidity

1. Introduction

Yann Martel is a contemporary Canadian writer, widely known for his book *Life of Pi*. Beyond the surface narrative of an Indian boy's 227-day journey across the ocean with a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker on a lifeboat, *Life of Pi* unfolds as a multi-dimensional work. The novel's exploration extends into rich animal imagery, religious metaphors, and philosophical musings, prompting scholarly analysis from diverse angles. Notably, researchers have delved into the questioning of Western rationality (Ding, 2020), ecocriticism and anthropocentrism (Ilić, 2017) and oceanic sublime (Elvin, 2020). Besides, human-animal relation, post-modern narrative, religious themes, and comparative studies have emerged as fervent areas of discussion in the burgeoning history of Pi scholarship.

Given the contemporary animal turn in the scholarship, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* aroused heated discussion for its animal images. Some scholars have paid attention to the significant animal metaphors and human-animal relationship in the novel. Huang (2013) focuses on ethical issues in *Life of Pi*, holds

that the character of Pi reflects the two sides of Sphinx factor, i.e. rational factor and animal factor. The novel is also interpreted as an ecological piece that explores the equilibrium between humanity and animality. Squire (2017) provides an ecological reading of the novel, argues that “the novel’s ‘happy ending’ is a metaphor for the temporal goal of a sustainable world” (p. 230) and calls for co-existence between human and non-human world.

Life of Pi can also be read as a post-modern narrative. Marais (2018) has applied the postmodernist technique “carnavalesque” as a subversive literary mode to the novel with great dexterity. John Kuriakose (2018) identifies the use of the author’s note as a metafictional strategy through the analysis of *Life of Pi*’s indeterminate time with the use of Bakhtin’s para-text. Besides, a unique reading of the novel is that Nurhidayah (2016) works with Jean Baudillard’s concepts of simulacra, simulation, and hyper-reality to illustrate that Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* ultimately “delivers the hyper-reality behind its simulation in the two simulacra stories” (p. 105).

As for the theme of spiritual beliefs, Kuriakose (2018) compares various Indian spiritual leaders’ expanded sense of beliefs to the novel’s diversity of faiths. Stratton (2004) and Stephens (2010) assert that the novel is not about God’s existence or even faith, but in questing for faith in God.

In terms of contextual reading, Boever (2012)⁰ has analyzed *Life of Pi*’s use of animals via issues of sovereignty that became especially relevant post-9/11. In Rui’s (2018) analysis, *Life of Pi* is contextualized within the framework of “Indo-chic” within the contemporary global literary market, which is achieved by examining Martel’s portrayal of India in the novel through the lens of cosmopolitanism.

In terms of comparative study, it has also been shown that there is a close relationship between *Life of Pi* and *the Ancient Mariner*, Poe’s *Arthur Gordon Pym* and especially *Robinson Crusoe* because of their similar shipwreck narrative and adventure format (Dwyer 2008; Steensma, 2021).

In conclusion, the criticism of Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* has aroused heated discussion. However, research on post-colonial Indian diasporas has been meagre. While scholars such as Tian (2018; 2022) and Jiang (2019) have examined the post-colonial themes in *Life of Pi*, their emphasis tend to revolve around the binary opposition between colonizers and the colonized, particularly highlighting the analogies drawn between animals and the colonized, rather than fully addressing the Indian post-colonial diasporas portrayed in the novel. These dispersed diasporic communities exist within liminal spaces, yet their nuanced emotions and agency in constructing national identity fall into neglect. Hence, this paper integrates the contemporary global discourse on immigration. In a period of increasing globalization, the rapid creation of multinationals, the formation of diasporic communities, massive flows of transmigration and border crossings, acculturation for immigrants from the Third World becomes increasingly complicated. In *life of Pi*, the protagonist Pi serves as a paradigmatic case of identity construction through dispersal and transnational encounters, generating a space fraught with tension as he navigates between diverse cultures. This paper mainly explores Pi’s struggles and agency

within two liminal spaces: Pondicherry, the former French colonial capital of India, and the lifeboat, shedding light on immigrants' proactive endeavors to transcend marginalization. Additionally, the formation of his hybrid national identity in Toronto's multicultural landscape merits attention, particularly amidst the contested terrain of acculturation and identity issues in post-modern society, characterized by fluidity and cultural blending.

2. Pondicherry: Formation of Hybrid Identity

Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* reflects a diasporic Indian boy's transnational experiences. The term "diasporas" primarily refers to "those who are dispersed or scattered outside their homeland but still maintain a significant connection to their ethnic culture, history, and ancestral land" (Wu, pp. 204-205). In the post-colonial context, it typically refers to groups that have migrated from colonies to the colonizing country to live (Wu, p. 205), which is clearly shown in *Life of Pi*. When Pi is sixteen, his family decides to emigrate. His father sells off the animals to an American zoo and the family travels with them across the Pacific from India to Canada. Various "Third World" immigrants represented by Pi and his family are eager to construct their cultural identities as citizens of "First World" countries such as USA and Canada.

2.1 The Legacy of Colonization

"After India gained independence, large-scale emigration began in the 1960s, reaching its peak in the 1970s" (Qiu, p. 25). The main part of the novel *Life of Pi* takes place in the 1970s, in the midst of India's immigration wave. The underlying reasons for the immigration wave are closely tied to Western capitalist colonial expansion. As for the novel's setting, the reason why Yann Martel chooses Pondicherry as the initial setting of the story may lie in that it is "the first tangible house that has direct influence on the formation of Pi's hybrid identity" (Tian, p. 179). Pondicherry was once the French colonial capital of India under the domination of the British Empire until 1954. Although the novel takes place 20 years later, the legacy of colonization persists.

In *Life of Pi*, one example is Pi's mother, who hailed from a Hindu background but received Baptist education from an early age. A Hindu upbringing and a Baptist education had precisely "cancelled each other out as far as religion was concerned and had left her serenely impious" (Martel, p. 65). Such an experience of Pi's mother has reflected "the diminishing influence of indigenous Indian religions under the impact of foreign cultural influences" (Rui, p. 106). Another example is the Metaphor for Pi's Name. Pi's full name is Piscine Molitor Patel. The name "Piscine Molitor" given to Pi by his uncle Mamaji is derived from a famous public swimming pool in France. This reference has been read as "a reflection on their identity as French colonial captives" (Tian, p. 61).

In this sense, Pi, despite being of an Indian descent, has lived in Pondicherry within the system affected by French colonial culture. Therefore, Pondicherry is a space for Pi to mix the cultures between the East and the West. When Pi finds himself in the threshold space of cultural convergence and collision,

he stands the chance of constructing a dynamic and hybrid identity between these two cultures.

2.2 Agency of Immigrants: Pi's Name Change

The agency of immigrants represented by Pi's name change is stressed. To prevent classmates from making jokes about his name, he interpreted his name "Pi" to the entire school community as the internationally recognized mathematical symbol π . The infinite, non-repeating irrational number π serves as "a vivid symbol of the spirit trajectory of Pi, constantly seeking, growing, and never cycling" (Gai, p. 98). In doing so, he not only subverts the authority of colonialism and exhibits "cultural resistance to French colonialism" (Tian, p. 179), but also eliminated the regional and ethnic features typically associated with people's names. The act of changing his name from the French name, Piscine Molitor Patel, to Pi Patel reflects Pi's self-shaping power and individual agency, enables him to continuously grow and become stronger.

Overall, it can be said that Martel has emphasized the agency or the proactive and creative abilities of immigrants from the Third World in the pivotal and ambiguous in-between space. He views the agency of Indian diasporas as a potent strategy for navigating cultural disruptions and constructing fluid and hybrid identities.

3. Lifeboat: Suffering and Agency in Liminal Space

The liminal phase is defined as "the transitional period from one stage to another in a society or culture" (Turner, p. 169) and a state of "betwixt and between two worlds" (Van Gennep, p. 15). This in-between space is filled with changes such as the transformation from old to new, and it is characterized by suspension, ambiguity, confusion, and contradictions.

3.1 Suffering in the Liminality: Violence and Ugly Feelings

Paul Gilroy (1993) once pointed out in his work *The Black Atlantic* that, ships are "mobile dement that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected" (p. 16). Consequently, it is imperative to consider them as cultural artifacts. In *Life of Pi*, the lifeboat serves as a metaphorical threshold, marking the boundary between Pi's familiar past in India and the uncertain, transformative future of infinite possibilities awaiting him onshore. When Pi is on the lifeboat, he is actually in a blurred in-between liminal space. Pi's journey across the Pacific Ocean aboard this lifeboat represents a physical and mental liminal phase. It seems that Pi's rootless state floating on the lifeboat or the absence of a house image is not only a metaphor of "the instability of exiles of settlement and identity" (Tian, p. 180), but also suggests that he is neither fully part of the familiar homeland he left behind nor integrated into the promised land, symbolizing a state of uncertainty and suspension.

Pi's journey across the vast sea with a tiger for 227 days can be regarded as "the intuitive metaphor of the suffering of immigrants" (Gai, p. 96). Such a suffering is evident in the shadow of death and violence on the lifeboat, accompanied by the Pi's negative emotion such as horror, despair and guilty, which serves as the obstacle for Pi to overcome.

During the 227 days Pi drifted on the sea, the shadow of death and violence lingers. Martel portrays a scene on the lifeboat where the hyena running non-stop around the injured zebra. In this scene, the fact that the hyena as the executor of death can launch attacks at any time while running in circles signifies “the constant, irresistible and unpredictable threat of death” (Zhang & Shi, p. 57). Besides, owing to the harsh living environment, the shortage of food and fresh water, and the continuous threat from a fierce hungry tiger, Pi's life on the lifeboat is undoubtedly in great danger all the time. It is no wonder that Pi himself renders his threatened and precious life floating on the ocean “a very terribly fickle existence” (Martel, p. 213). For him, “physically it is extraordinarily arduous, and morally it is killing” (Martel, p. 217).

Moreover, the shadow of death is accompanied by a span of Pi's negative emotion such as life-threatening horror, anxiety of running out of paper and guilty for the dead. On the lifeboat, Pi harbors an unavoidable anguish and sentiment which is “a heavy blackness that led no light in or out” and “a hell beyond expression” (Martel, p. 209). In a sense, these ugly feelings stand for the discomforts of immigrants' adaptation.

Therefore, this journey, laden with physical violence and emotional upheaval, is illustrative of the transformative and challenging nature of Pi's immigration from India to Canada.

3.2 Agency in Liminality: Pi's Diary Writing

As for the agency of Pi on the lifeboat, in an interview, Martel once stated that “death, violence, and fear are phenomena that impel us to change...some change is self-willed, some, through fear of death, is forced upon us” (p. 21). One of the most fascinating parts of *Life of Pi* lies in that though Pi is confronted with and suffered from fear and violence in the liminality, he has to deal with the obstacle, harness his agency to adapt, integrate, and even redefine his identity.

Pi also regards life on a lifeboat as “an end game in chess, a game with few pieces”, which you must “make adjustments if you want to survive” (Martel, p. 217). It is through these adjustments that Pi demonstrates his individual agency during his liminal phase.

One notable instance in the novel is Pi's diary writing on the lifeboat. Pi started keeping a diary a week or so after the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*. In his diary, he talked about “things that happened and how I felt, about what I caught and what I didn't, about seas and weather, about problems and solutions, about Richard Parker” (Martel, p. 208). Firstly, these diaries serve as the supportive historical records of his existence and resilience in the liminality. As diary writing is a record of life traces and an analysis of one's psychology, these diaries effectively capture Pi's evolving identity. Secondly, as Macfarlane (2024) suggests, “the tradition of diaries since the 16th century is closely related to Puritanism, which believes that God is in people's hearts” (p. 119). By keeping diaries to speak to God, Pi is able to “seek inspiration for the salvation of the soul” (Wang, p. 48) through daily life experiences. Thirdly, Pi can also rewrite his history in his diaries by blurring the boundary between reality and illusion. Overall, diary writing enables Pi to achieve self-discovery and self-empowerment. It is shown that the liminal

phase on the lifeboat, with its inherent uncertainties and possibilities, provides a unique space for individuals to exercise agency.

4. Toronto: Construction of Transnational Identity

At the end of the novel, the lifeboat runs aground on the shore and Pi embarks on a new life in Toronto. Pi uses two narratives to convey his story, one involving animals and another without, and poses the question, “which story do you prefer?” (Martel, p. 317). However, “the novel does not imply an either/or choice between ‘yeastless factuality’ (Martel, p. 81) and imagination, but a hybrid of rationalities that help make sense of the world” (Ding, p. 312). “As globalization and cultural diversity gradually dismantle and disrupt traditional notions of national identity, which are bound by territory, culture, and history, new cognitive paradigms are emerging” (Wu, p. 223). In the context of contemporary discourse, the portrayal of national identity in *Life of Pi* exhibits postmodern characteristics. As the author himself belongs to the dispersed multicultural community, the intention of him is to depict the hybrid nature of national identity.

4.1 Pluralistic Spirits in Multicultural Society

On the one hand, in such a work of dispersed Indian identity, Martel does not emphasize the pure Indianness as a core element of national identity. Instead, he presents a transcultural and hybrid nature. The Third Space, introduced by Homi Bhabha, represents the cultural hybridity of national identity in a postmodern context. As Tian (2022) suggests, “the stable house where Pi inhabits in Toronto symbolizes Pi’s reaching into the third space” (p. 178). In this space, Pi embraces harmoniously different cultures. According to Kuriakose (2018), “the description of his house in Toronto is an epitome of the book’s concept of singular and universal beliefs; the house as a temple sums up this spiritual theme of the book” (p. 163). In a sense, the iconographies, scriptures and statues in the house symbolizes Pi’s pluralistic spiritual practices, enabling him to transcend the borders of cultural differences in a multi-cultural society. Another detail lies in that Pi asks his mother why Mamaji is both Indian and French and has two passports, and this question suggests “the need to re-conceptualize the modern notions of nation, rationality, and identity” (Ding, p. 309).

4.2 Indianness and Nostalgia

On the other hand, Pi simultaneously retains strong affiliations, identifications and loyalties to the culture of his homeland without casting out his Indianness. Some scholar once made clear that the lifeboat is “a space for Pi to discard his Indianness and re-orientalize himself to be a representative of the West” (Jiang, p. 152). This can be proved by Pi’s abandoning his vegetarianism and his unwillingness to share the territory with the tiger, when the tiger Richard Parker is regarded as “a metaphor for India” (Jiang, p. 149) and part of Pi’s Indianness. However, leaving India does not imply complete isolation from its cultural traditions. In times of hardship, Pi still turns to Indian mythological references for solace and comfort.

Besides, Pi's national identity with India is also reflected in his nostalgia. When he settles down in Toronto, he misses Pondicherry and the tiger Richard Parker, who still occurs in his dreams. As Pi says, "they are nightmares mostly, but nightmares tinged with love" (Martel, p. 6)⁰. When Richard Parker walked into the jungle without any sort of goodbye, without looking back even once, Pi feels that "pain is like an axe that chops at my heart" (Martel, p. 6). Since Richard Parker can be read as a cultural metaphor for Pi's Indianness, Pi's nostalgia implies that although in a multicultural environment, he does not fully discard his mother culture. Also, such a nostalgia is an emotion that usually appears in the diaspora examples. As Huggan and Tiffin (2010)⁰ demonstrated, the relationship between Pi and Richard Parker is an example for discussing how the Eastern people who migrate to the West and form their complicated and hybrid identities when they go beyond their geographical and cultural boundaries.

Hence, the blended ethnic identity formed by Pi's travels across different national cultures aligns with Gilroy's concept of "dynamic diasporic identity" (p. 27). In the current uncertain, open, complex, and diverse era of globalization, as for the question of how should post-colonial diasporic immigrants represented by Pi navigate Toronto's multicultural reality, *Life of Pi* may offer a pathway for survival.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the immigrant experience in *Life of Pi* through the lens of liminality and diaspora. It can be shown that contemporary diaspora communities have the potential to shift from a singular national identity to a transnational one, facilitated by factors such as agency and subjectivity during the in-between space. This involves a shift from fixed and conservative ethnic affiliations towards a contemporary identity that is blended, diversified, and receptive to the broader global context. Consequently, *Life of Pi* serves as both an examination of societal multiculturalism and an analysis of the intricate formation of individual identity.

For immigrant communities in the context of globalization, they are experiencing such a tumultuous transitional period. The collision of diversity makes conflicts anywhere in the world. The emergence of *Life of Pi* coincided with the occurrence of the 9/11 terrorist attack in the United States. Following this event, the acculturation of the Indian diaspora in America and Europe has undergone substantial changes, particularly when viewed through the prisms of race and class. As Bhatia suggests, "the post-9/11 spotlight and media coverage had suddenly thrust these male adults into the camp of the terrorists and made them vulnerable to attacks from the public" (Sunil Bhatia, p. 37)⁰. Recognizing the complications involved in understanding the diasporic identity, he engaged in raising an insightful question: "when does one stop being a migrant and become an "acculturated citizen"? (p. 35), which suggest that acculturation is not a static product but a dynamic process.

In this sense, Martel envisioned in *Life of Pi* that under circumstances of diversity, boundaries between different religions or cultures could be breached. The ideological concepts in *Life of Pi* lead to a deeper

understanding and contemplation of multiculturalism, which encourages further exploration of the possibilities and necessity for harmonious coexistence of pluralistic culture, as well as the construction of a blended national identity for dispersed immigrants.

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