

## Pi's Individuality in His Personal Societies and a Post Modern World

Piscine Molitor Patel, the main character in Life of Pi by Yann Martel, goes through transitions of personal identity as the micro-society around him changes and he faces different situations and experiences. His basic personality remains intact; however, he adapts his outward identity to fit changing situations. In terms of psychology these facets can be referred to as the self and the ego:

“Individuality is born at that moment - and only at that moment – when the soul in its loneliness sees its life in society – necessarily under a system of rules – as *subject to a goal-seeking beyond these rules,*” [emphasis Moore’s] (Moore 93). In each of the micro-societies where Piscine Molitor Patel finds himself interacting he will certainly face this loneliness. Before Piscine can find his personal identity he must deal with the identity given him by his parents. Moore suggests,

“It is the feebly distinguished but promissory biological specimen that receives from its parental stock an *individual name*, coupled usually with a family name or clan name. This name – not yet known by its owner – far from implying self-sufficiency, will, nevertheless, indicate a world structure in which the contrast between I and thou is functional .... Individuality is not conferred: it has to be achieved” (91).

Piscine will achieve this individuality. In terms both psychological and spiritual (religion) Piscine stands firm as a person of strength with a strong sense of himself as an individual with a unique identity.

Gita Patel and Santosh Patel gift their second son with a moniker of extreme exclusivity. Santosh's best friend is a swimmer extraordinaire. This friend, Francis Adirubasamy, called Mamaji, by Piscine, often extols the wonder of his favorite swimming pool, "but no pool in Mamaji's eyes matched the glory of the Piscine Molitor. It was the crowning aquatic glory of Paris, indeed, of the entire civilized world" (Martel 11). Piscine will forever be connected to Mamaji's recollections of that pool; he will also be linked interminably with water:

"It was the only pool that made Mamaji fall silent, his memory making too many lengths to mention. Mamaji remembered, Father dreamed. That is how I got my name when I entered this world, a last, welcome addition to my family, three years after Ravi: Piscine Molitor Patel" (Martel 12).

Piscine's individual name confers a unique identity and implication of the outcast in his first two societies: that of his individual family and the larger Indian society in which they are located. It is obvious that no other person shares his name.

Once Piscine leaves the nurturing environment of his nuclear family and faces the larger adolescent society of the school setting, he learns that his name is regarded as strange and exceedingly different. In the common style of childhood cruelties, the boys at school award Piscine a new name. They twist the French into a vulgar English word, "pissing." He suffers in silence and shame

as even teachers inadvertently slip into this easier-to-pronounce usage. But Piscine has been groomed by his family to think for himself: “I spent my last year at St Joseph’s feeling like the persecuted prophet Muhammad in Mecca ... “I planned my escape and the beginning of a new time for me” (Martel 21). Piscine Molitor Patel announces, in class at the blackboard, that he is “known to all as Pi Patel” (Martel 22 – 23). This is clearly the emergence of a new, stronger personality and one derived from the constant teasing Pi has suffered at the hands of his classmates who are acting “morbidly, often curiously, preoccupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are” (Erikson 128).

He has realized the goal of individuality spoken of by Moore: “The individuality we are here concerned with is a very precious attribute of human personality, a quality or group of qualities that make a person not only different from everybody else, but in some significant way irreplaceable” (91). He has faced his adversaries and won a remarkable strike for acceptance within the micro-society of the new academic setting. This achievement was completed in the style of Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish monk who did not survive the Nazi invasion of his country: “On the Blackboard he wrote “ $w = W$ ,” grinning widely as he did so. ‘A very clear formula, don’t you agree? The little ‘w’ stands for my will, the capital ‘W’ for the will of God’” (Colson 314 -315). Whether or not Pi was aware of having copied a man of God is not clear in the text of Pi, but it does follow that his action was not one-hundred per cent original, as Pi wrote in the same style used by Kolbe. Perhaps Martel was deliberate in this association with

Christianity, or conceivably his intent was to invoke the continuity of the infinite number Pi. Both explorations yield appealing conjecture.

Choosing Pi, a mathematical term understood by his classmates, to replace the undesired title of Piscine is a show of unparalleled brilliance in establishing a personal identity among Pi's peers. He associates himself with Hindu history as well as the Biblical scholar Nehemiah. Surely Martel was aware of this as he pounded out the text for this novel. First, "Early Hindu knowledge [concerning the solution to  $\pi$ ] was summarized by Aryabhata in the *Aryabhatiya*, written in 499 A.D" (Beckman 26). Secondly, "Nehemiah was a Hebrew Rabbi, scholar and teacher who lived in Palestine and wrote about 150 A.D., after the last Judean revolt against the Romans led by Bar-Kokba and resulting in the Diaspora of the Jews. Nehemiah was the author of the Mishnat ha-Middot, the earliest Hebrew geometry known to us" (Beckman 75, 132-135). A portion of Nehemiah's work concerned  $\pi$ . Not only has Pi created an identity that suits his personality, he launches an alliance with his country's history and one of his three religious interests.

Martel has infused Pi with an intense desire for things spiritual. Critic Nathan Whitlock states, "But the side-theme of Pi's triple conversion to Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam feels stitched in from another story" (22 – 23). In fact, this multi-practice adds to Pi's distinction and enhances his individuality. Erik Erikson states,

"If the earliest stage bequeathed to the identity crisis an important need for trust in oneself and in others, then clearly the adolescent

looks most fervently for men and ideas to have *faith* in, which also means men and ideas in whose service it would seem worth while to prove oneself trustworthy” [emphasis Erikson’s] (128 – 129).

Pi’s crisis which involved the changing of his name also pushed him to the extreme in finding spiritual guidance and in attaching himself to *three* faiths. If one faith doesn’t suit his immediate needs, he can try the next in sequence until one does fulfill his emotional requirements. During the time that his schoolmates excluded him from the social structure by casting him aside through the name-calling, Pi was forced to create his own society. This he did by choosing to practice multiple religions. In more scholarly language, “Individuality is born at that moment - and only at that moment – when the soul in its loneliness sees its life in society – necessarily under a system of rules – as *subject to a goal-seeking beyond these rules*” [emphasis Moore’s] (Moore 93). This goal is commonly the unspoken treasure of religion, conveyed to the seeker as a privately won vision.

The individual is the potential prophet. That experience may be called mystical, not in the sense of a subliminal blur, but in the sense of a directive, seeking embodiment, including the corrective function of the Socratic familiar spirit” (Moore 93). Pi’s treasure chest overflows with religious practices and his individuality is affirmed. Orrin Klapp writes,

“Another thing (besides motivation to engage in new experience) which seems plain from such symptoms is that identity problems are not troubles an individual gets into by using or misusing his

mind, but result from a social milieu – perhaps a lack of structure or feed back – which makes it harder for individuals to define themselves satisfactorily, even when they use their minds properly and even when they have plenty of time to sit around and wonder who they are” (14).

He further states, "Doubtless such conditions as loss of tradition, shallowness of relationships, inadequacy of feedback, which make normal people unhappy, are crises with which it may be impossible to cope for those who were cheated in their first relationship" (33). Although Pi has not been cheated in his first relationship, he has used the richness of his first relationships to respond to the uncouth milieu of his classmates by re-creating himself within the bounds of his personality. One might conclude that Pi fits snugly into the definition Erikson has devised for mental health in an adolescent,

“In the sequence of his most personal experiences the healthy child, given a reasonable amount of proper guidance, can be trusted to obey inner laws of development, laws which create a succession of potentialities for significant interaction with those persons who tend and respond to him and those institutions which are ready for him” (93).

Pi stretched beyond simple health, and forced the institution filled with boys much like himself to accept him into their formerly closed society.

Pi's challenges do not end with the schoolyard bullies. Once he has tamed that situation, he must pack his belongings and prepare for a move across

the ocean to a completely new society. Before reaching the shores of Canada, the ship carrying Pi and his family is wrecked and Pi finds himself marooned with a mini-zoo on a lifeboat. As is the case on land, the animals soon prey on one another until Pi is alone with a Bengal Tiger named Richard Parker. This places Pi in a society of two: one man, one animal. He must now re-adapt himself and his personality in order to survive in body, if not in soul. But Pi does both.

Pi draws on the many lessons he learned at his father's knee when he ran a zoo in Pondicherry. Pi fully grasps the differences in human survival and animal survival. He wills himself to think beyond his years and to expand his identity into one which includes concepts outside his previous societal mores.

"All civilization involves membership in a society under customary rules. All living civilization finds ways of revising its rules under the aegis of persons presumably endowed with a sense of the goal of law" (Moore 93). Pi knows the laws of his immediate society have changed and he will adapt his behavior to remain within those bounds. As he reviews his knowledge Pi begins to map a strategy that will delineate his portion of the lifeboat from that territory marked by Richard Parker. Pi now uses his bodily secretions, once the term for which was the bane of his existence, to protect his area. Although using urine to maintain a distance between two parties on the same lifeboat sounds unhygienic and foul, it was vital that Pi retain a separate, safe space. "As responsible agents, persons are usually regarded as unique individuals with a measure of autonomy" (Evans 10). Pi maintained a distance and an autonomy; otherwise his life would be forfeit.

Once Pi established territorial limits with Richard Parker, he moved to initiate the semblance of a working relationship with the ferocious beast. In order for their minute society to endure Pi would need to rely on Parker for companionship. Pi would never be able to trust Richard Parker, nor would Parker help to maintain supplies. But Parker did supply Pi with concerns beyond his own subsistence. “The term ‘culture,’ too, in its broadest sense, attempts to bring man’s actions and meanings down to the most basic level of significance, to examine them in universal terms in an attempt to understand them. When we speak of people belonging to different cultures, then, we are referring to a very basic kind of difference between them, suggesting that there are specific varieties of the phenomenon of man” (Anderson 54). Pi certainly fashioned an exceptional culture while sharing the lifeboat with Parker.

Pi survived the taunting of his classmates by re-defining himself with infusions of Hindu and Christian thought. He included a mathematical bias that his peers could understand. When faced with the most unusual society of two, himself and Richard Parker, he once more proved that his identity could endure matchless circumstances intact. But Pi has one last test to confront. His identity is defined in postmodern terminology and genre. “‘Postmodern’ does not designate a systematic theory or a comprehensive philosophy, but rather diverse diagnoses and interpretations of the current culture, a depiction of a multitude of interrelated phenomena” (Anderson 19). Pi’s memoir fits these criteria since he follows a variety of religions (at one time), and the physical survival of himself and Richard Parker depend entirely on Pi’s ability to modify his behavior to fit the

circumstances presented by events beyond his control. Pi repeatedly transforms himself without losing the core of his being in the process. One concludes that Pi has the capacity to endure almost any situation.

“In philosophy there is a departure from the belief in one true reality – subjectively copied in our heads by perception or objectively represented in scientific models.... Knowledge becomes the ability to perform effective actions” (Anderson 19). Again Pi has met the challenge. His knowledge has sustained him against all odds. True reality is left for the reader to decide as an alternate ending is proffered for Life of Pi. Either way, Pi has survived and actually lived to prosper. Although this lively novel is fiction, the reader walks away believing the reality created in the text. One must be reminded that neither story is true reality. Perception conveys one account and reality suggests another. Postmodernity assures the reader he may resolve the matter himself.

Life of Pi presents a complicated picture of identity with many facets in the character of Pi. He is variegated in his personality and yet he maintains a sense of unity throughout the whole. “This personalistic framework permeates our everyday understanding of ourselves and our social relationships. Its importance can hardly be overestimated” (Evans 11). Even on the lifeboat, Pi remembered his three religions. He stayed true to the essence of his personhood. His social relationships were maintained under the auspices of his deepest sense of self. “Our nervous system urges us to protect ourselves and, when we are safe, to enjoy ourselves. Our mind must choose what seems best from the possibilities that we recognize are open to us” (Glasser 11). Again, Pi chooses the very best

options available to him. He uses all his knowledge and creativity to maintain his mental health and his physical well-being.

“When our mind and our nervous system are in harmony, we feel good; when they conflict, as they often do, we suffer. For example, although suffering intense fear most soldiers obey orders and go into battle, thus choosing to override their nervous systems, which sends a constant stream of messages to their conscious mind urging them to change their behavior and run” (11).

Pi demonstrated these traits beyond all expectations. He is a perfect example of the postmodern identity success.

## Works Cited:

- Anderson, Walter Truett, ed. The Truth About the Truth, De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1995.
- Beckman, Petr. A History of  $\pi$  (PI). New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1993.
- Colson, Charles, and Ellen Santilli Vaughn. The Body: Being Light in the Darkness. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992.
- Erikson, Erik H., Identity Youth in Crisis. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1968.
- Evans, Stephen C. Preserving the Person: a Look at the Human Sciences. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979.
- Glasser, M.D., William. The Identity Society. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.
- Klapp, Orrin E., Collective Search for Identity. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969.
- Martel, Yann. Life of Pi. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2001.
- Moore, Charles A., ed. The Status of the Individual in the East and West. Report of the Fourth East-West Philosopher's Conference., summer 1964, U of Hawaii. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968.
- Whitlock, Nathan, *Review of The Life of Pi*, by Yann Martel. Quill & Quire 67, no. 8 (August 2001): 22-3. Reproduced in Contemporary Literary Criticism-Select.