

MATERIAL ETHICS OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN YANN MARTEL'S LIFE OF PI**Dragoş Osoianu, PhD Student, "Ovidius" University of Constanța**

*Abstract: This paper aims to establish an onto-epistemological connection between the realm of animals and the realm of human beings within the context of the narrative discourse of the novel *Life of Pi*. The binary and essential oppositions between reason and imagination, atheism and religion, human and non-human, subject and object, culture and nature are deconstructed in order to reveal a unity of homogeneous dichotomies. The concept of Material Ecocriticism is applied to this work with the goal to highlight the fact that the ethical energies of "doing" are pragmatically and semantically situated between the ontology of "being" and the epistemology of "knowing". These shallow contraries ought to be comprehended through and within the larger context of immanence in which all beings and objects share the same existential substance and in which they are axiologically equal. Thus, the human and societal agencies encounter the agentive forces of Nature, which partially reshape and renegotiate the cultural discourse. The main character, Pi, represents the cosmopolitan thinker in terms of his multicultural and religious background. Through the agency of imagination, he unifies the plane of immanence with the mythical and religious state of the unconscious, and the ecology of society with the forces of animals and Nature.*

Keywords: Material Ecocriticism, immanence, agency, religion, Life of Pi.

Introduction

The novel *Life of Pi* displays a cultural journey towards a spiritual fulfilment, the action gravitating around the main character, Piscine Molitor Patel. Etymologically and semantically thinking, the word "culture", with its Latin origins, means "to nurture", "to cultivate", "to grow", "to eat", "to educate", "to worship", "to inhabit". From a material-ecocritical point of view, the cultural domain shares its semantics both with the ecology of civilization and with the ecology of the environment, due to the fact that the human being cultivates one's soul through education and the space of dwelling through physical work. The "neo-materialist renaissance" (Iovino; Oppermann "Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity" 75) paradigm sublimates the linguistic-structuralist approach, by which reality is a linguistic construct, and the postmodern-poststructuralist view, by which the same reality is socially constructed. In cognitive terms, it rejects the dualities of mind and body, culture and nature, psyche and reality, knowing and being, discursive and material, human and animal, reason and imagination. Herewith, the generic culture does not constitute a departure from the natural environment, but a continuance from and towards its ancestral wild cognate.

In the light of this relationship between civilization and wilderness, another distinction ought to be made between specific and alien cultures and religions, in this manner, three steps of integrating cultural-theological alterity into the original religious space being defining for Pi. The first is the multicultural aspect, which comprises distinct cultural groups with equal social status; they exchange societal behaviors and features, but the final integration is shallow. The second consists in the cross-cultural aspect, in which there is an obvious

intentionality to break boundaries by sharing related characteristics; the interrelatedness and the openness in building a new community take place, at the same time, with preserving the difference and alterity. The third step coincides with the inter-cultural aspect, by which mutuality, acceptance, diversity, learning from each other and deep integration are axiologically and pragmatically encouraged; here, reshaping the boundaries and renegotiating the hierarchies of power represent something essential.

The last step is never taken by the main character, his “geographical” state being located at the threshold between “multi” and “cross” aspects. There can be observed a supposed multicultural amalgam of narrators, characters, events, cities, nationalities and religions. Hence, the author has Spanish-Canadian origins and has lived in USA, Canada, France, Costa Rica; the novel’s plot takes place in postcolonial times, when the period of “The Emergency” coincides with post-British and national feeling of new-born identity; the town of Pondicherry displays increased Indian, British and French diversity; Pi has a nomadic and fluid multicultural personality, by accepting various nationalities (French, Mexican, Japanese, Chinese, Canadian, Indian) and religions or philosophical systems (Hindu, Catholic-Christian, Islam, Judaism, Agnosticism, Atheism, Zoology, Rationalism).

“One Nation in the Sky”

In this cosmopolitan, “classless community” and “libertarian society” (Bookchin 3), however, hierarchies of power between the human and the animal realms, between different nationalities and ethnicities, and between various system of belief are continuously reshaped. The human beings have exported their inner hierarchies to the environment for further exerting their will to dominate, because “the very domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human” (65). A natural and, at the same time, a societal law merges the domain of religion with the domain of wilderness: “I know zoos are no longer in people’s good graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both” (Martel 19). The wild animals are thought to be free outside the cages, but the so-called freedom of natural environment faces multiple menaces, such as the fittest or the strongest principle of survival, hunger, thirst, unpredictable weather conditions.

The animal freedom works as a metaphor for people’s religious believes, especially for those who are free of any system of thinking, like agnostics. The social structures shape the individual minds and hearts, but, at the same time, there is an idiosyncratic freedom of choosing and imagining a real, fictional or religious system, and this choice influences the general societal behavior. The agnostic, with one’s “dry, yeastless factuality” (61), does not have the seminal yeast of imagination, the essential tool for encapsulating, in the same material world, the human mind and the religious ideal, the objective reality and the imaginative-subjective world, the human flaws and the virtue of love. Religion and fiction are both parts of the imaginative process, which requires horizontal and immanent faith on the part of the listener or believer; *Life of Pi* is “a story that will make you believe in God” (X). On the contrary, the atheist is to be admired because, as opposed to the agnostic, he or she has a conviction that something or someone does not exist. In this manner, the atheist has, at least, the possibility to believe, even though nothingness lacks the consistency of the reality; looking deeper, one can notice the fact that this scarcity of reality resembles both with the inconsistency of imagination and with the Hindu immersion into the mystic nothingness.

As having noticed, the plot and the major conflicts revolve around Pi, whose father became a secular humanist and whose mother mildly preserved the ancient faith in millions of deities and gods: “I have been a Hindu all my life. With its notions in mind I see my place in the universe. But we should not cling! A plague upon fundamentalists and liberalists!” (49).

The family represents the origin point from which one's identity is structured in terms of cultural and religious tenets. Being a socially constructed Hindu, acknowledging, in this way, his locus in the vast universal ecology, the main character also displays personal freedom, by which he rejects the overwhelming power of blind faith. Keeping a reasonable equilibrium between the ethical karma, related to the intentional and teleological causalities of deeds, and the Dharmic Rta, related to the universal logos of Cosmos, the cultural-religious-natural opposition might be bridged. The cycle of birth and rebirth is imagined as a temple, "a sacred cosmic womb, a place where everything is born" (49)

This sense of belonging to a specific religious place is connected to the feeling of home: "I owe to Hinduism the original landscape of my religious imagination...holy mountains and deep seas where gods, saints, villains and ordinary people rub their shoulders, and, in doing so, define who and why we are" (48). The universal womb or the native land represents the sacrosanct locus of transcendent imagination and platonic religion, the place in which the demarcation between here and there, shallow and deep, ordinary and saint, evil and good are overcome. All persons, objects, phenomena and places are fragmented parts, yet consubstantial, of the same material reality, sharing a communion between identity and alterity, and between cause, effect and scope. The contiguity of higher realms of existence to the concrete and material subsistence is mirrored by the Trimurti deity Vishnu, the Preserver, and his incarnated avatar, Krishna (52-3). Situated between Brahma the Creator and Shiva the Destroyer, this god has a rhizomatic role in the universe and he "has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo" (Deleuze, Guattari 25).

Described as a deity related to the color blue and clouds full of water, Vishnu hypostatizes himself in the form of the ocean. "The sea, as a pulsating nonhuman agent, functions as a vital force" ("Models of Narrativity" 81). Pi's ethic, fictional and religious imagination takes shape in order to from a cultural and theological influence on the environment; conversely, the sacred nature carries out an agentive force over the human discourse and behavior, especially in the moments of existential angst. This is the time of religious awaking, when the fragments of truth, both of created environment and nature, are reunited, when the ascetic and mystical powers of the human being are revitalized in order to sublimate the immediate reality, when the sadhu reminds oneself that the inner atman coincides with the ubiquitous Brahman. The former represents the personal soul, who tries to deliver oneself from this elusory world, whereas the latter represents the supreme reality, who (which) is here, there, within and beyond at once. It is interesting to highlight the fact that the nothingness of the material reality is its true nature, and the ultimate deity only transcends the immediate possibility of comprehension, but One's existence is intrinsically linked to this world; thus, the immanent materiality comprises both "transcendent" beings and "inferior" creatures.

This transcendence within immanence, of course with a subtle paradigmatic shift, is theologically translated into Christian tenets by the same Pi, who sees an evident resemblance of a Hindu temple with a Catholic church, which is full of icons and statues, iconographic symbols of the religious materiality of Christianity. Like any religious system, telling a fictional story needs commitment and faith on the part of the listeners, this conformity having biblical roots; even Christ used parables in order to convey His message: "For we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7); "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). On these lines, the conceptual category of faith is not distributed vertically by transcendent revelation, but it has a horizontal and immanent nature, feature that assures the conveying of the spoken reality from one human being to another. In other words, one's imagination is fictionally heard and read in the same plane of existence

and this also constitutes the reason for the power of faith; the story and its telling occur in the same spatial-temporal continuity.

Alongside faith, there is a more important act, namely the virtue of love: “Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 1:13); “And now abideth faith, hope, charity (love), these three; but the greatest of these is charity (love)” (1 Corinthians 13:13); “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16); “He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love” (1 John 4:8). There is an affinity between the creation of Man in His image (of personal Logos) and the creation of Nature in the image of logoi. In this sense, we can say that the world is “logically” articulated or ecological created. Because of the fact that the reason of creation is the intra-trinitarian love, which coincides here with logos and power, this “logical” love is pervasive through the entire ecological system. Its manifestations include every possible relation: the love between human beings, between animals, between humans and environment, and even the elemental love, between a plant and its ecosystem or between and an atom with another atom within a molecule. Therefore, this “logic love” constitutes the intrinsic reality, the mesh or the animating force in which and by which all living and non-living entities exist. As Pi says, “Life is so beautiful that death has fallen in love with it, a jealous, possessive love that grabs at what it can’ (Martel 6).

There is also an ascending force, of humanity, which is ecstatically (relationally, by exiting energetically the essence) trying to give back the divine love. Doing so, throughout an ascetic and contemplative act, the human beings appropriate liturgically the natural environment, in order to sanctify it and to unite with God, becoming gods. In this manner, Nature is not seen as a tool of exploitation, but an affectionate mode to jointly transcend to God. This ascetic-mystical movement is possible due to the incarnation of Christ, who has become part of this material reality. The agentive forces of Cosmos, having been again hallowed and transfigured by the hypostatic union, have influenced the human religious and cultural discourse in order to better integrate the human being into the larger ecology of Nature. When Pi “met Jesus Christ” (48), He has already been a Man, who experienced the cycle of birth and rebirth and who has recapitulated into His person the divine, the human and nature. Thus, the ethical co-extensive agentive forces between the cultural discourse and the natural text represent realities which cannot be denied.

Another monotheistic religion, which, nevertheless, radicalizes the Christian and Trinitarian discourse of “Domine-Deus” and of the dominion of man over nature, is Islam. The Takbir expression ‘Allahu akbar’ (81), translated as “God is great”, represents the formal short prayer for displaying faith; in other words, as having seen, faith is the means by which a reality from beyond could be comprehended and conveyed as a fictional story. The devotional “Alhamdulillah” consists in “Praise be to Allah, Lord of All Worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Ruler of Judgment Day...This is an outbreak of divinity” (123). This religious mysticism, remotely related to the Islamic-Sufism of “Lataif-e-sitta” and to Hindu “Chakra”, canalizes the believer’s energies towards extracting the intrinsic signs of Nature, in order to find its divine beauty; conversely, the divine Signifier signals His presence and power through the physical world. The material contingency means that the human being, encouraged by mutual love, can meet one’s Creator in this natural order.

The Islamic “oikos”, the encounter between God and one’s creation, equals to the locus of mosque, which “was truly on open construction, to God and to breeze...Immediately, it felt like a deeply religious contact” (58). Feeling home inside a cultural construction or in Nature represents the same sense of belonging to a consubstantial nature, in which everybody and everything lives and occurs on the same level of existence.

The openness does not allow closed spaces of solitude and essential oppositions between various individuals and objects, in this sense, a continuity of space being epistemologically “constructed”. The religious contact is possible through the agency of faith, the believer taking for granted its theological characteristics of “touching” the untouchable through imagination and the touchable through one’s physical senses. The animistic breeze has obviously agentive powers, influencing the act of faith, the human discourse, processes of consciousness and unconsciousness. The devotional deepness directly relates to the deep-ecological and ontological threads that we share with the natural environment.

The Sky Is Here

The last Pi’s religious bond consists in Judaism, his academic research being related to the cosmogonic vision of Lurianic Kabbalah (3), an esoteric and mystical school of thought, which explained the relationship and also the distinction between the apophatic and a priori Ein Sof, apprehended as God before any spiritual or material creation, and the finite universe, in which all higher or inferior being live. The ship Tzintzum, which “moved with the slow, massive confidence of a continent” (98), amplifies the previous idea because it semantically extends the Hebrew understanding of the act of creation. By contracting one’s infinite light, God allowed space and created light to exist, and, doing so, an empty space of free will could be possible. In this way, the transcendent and ubiquitous deity is simultaneously absent and present, within a post-spatial exile and immanent to the sephirotic energies of creation. Symbolically speaking, the ship represents a metaphor for prohibiting the mono-cultural or the simplified metanarrative of one single religion: “all religions are true” (chapter 23). The myth of flood and of a reborn cultural hero, regardless of the Sumerian-Mesopotamian Gilgamesh, the Puranic-Hindu Mann, warned by the avatar of Vishnu, or the Hebrew-Christian-Islamic Noah, represent, in essence, the same fictional hero, who sacrifices himself in order to deliver humanity from death and to metaphorically marry the realm of the human civilization, with its inner conflictual states of being, to the realm of wilderness, animals and nature, in general.

Following the same theological perspective of inter-religious communion, one can assert that the Hindu religion(s) encourage polytheism and, doing so, there is no problem in accepting the religious connection of the “other”; nevertheless, the monotheistic religions face multiple issues of hierarchies of power and domination, matters that could be shaded to a certain extent. On this line, it is important to emphasize an ancient, post-Sumerian and Semitic deity, called “El”, who, in the Canaanite religion, represented the Father of Creation, humanity and all creatures. In the Hebrew tradition, “El” remained for a long time and, later, it was translated as “Yahweh”, which means “El who is present, who makes himself manifest”, “he causes to be”, or “Elohim”, which means “God”, “Gods”, “powers”. The plural shows that the ancient deity of Judaism was conceived as being multiple and living energetically within the created Nature. This biblical name was also taken by the Islamic tradition, with Semitic, Arabic or non-Arabic origins, as “Allah”, which means “the God”, having almost the same meanings as previously shown.

Concerning Christianity, “Elohim” was recognized as a divine name, Christ used the words “Eli” (Matthew 27:46), but the religious multiplicity has been extended. In One’s essence, God is one, but in One’s Trinity, God is multiple, existing and energetically manifesting through the agency of three persons. These “faces” or theatrical “masks” represent more than one “prosopon”, “persona” or “hypostasis” and fictionally tell a story about the love between deities or between gods and humans. There is one god and multiple culturally and historically constructed manifestations according to the multiplicity of identities, civilizations and cultures: “Why can’t I be a Hindu, a Christian and a

Muslim?...One nation in the sky?...Yes. Or none” (Martel 79); “Jesus, Mary, Muhammad and Vishnu, how good to see you, Richard Parker!...Vishnu preserve me, Allah protect me, Christ save me!” (95). Pi’s “ecology of mind” (Bateson 1) tries to maintain a “homeostasis” (354) between his multiple religious systems and between the divine, human, cultural, natural and animal realms of consciousness. The divine ought to be embedded into the human domain and the human being embedded into the natural environment, all of them incorporated in the same plane of “pure immanence” (Deleuze, Guattari 282).

This natural equilibrium is acquired through the agency of Pi and his consubstantial foil, Richard Parker through multiple processes of identitary “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization” (Deleuze, Guattari 63), by which nature is married again to culture and religion: “we need to apprehend the world through interchangeable lenses of the three ecologies: “social ecology”, “mental ecology”, “environmental ecology” (Guattari 134). Symbolically speaking, from a judicial point of view, his name relates to the word “plaintiff”, the person who initiates a lawsuit before a court, meaning that he defies the metanarrative of a single objective truth, God or the perceived reality. Secondly, from a biological point of view, it relates to the osmotic pressure, which enables the liquid equalization of two sides in the cellular processes and it means the homogeneity of the dichotomy reason-culture and imagination-religion-fiction-nature. Thirdly, from a physical point of view, it relates to subatomic particles, which consist in one quark and one antiquark, and it means that, within the same plane of existence, contraries inherently exist, like Pi and his tiger. Fourthly, from a mathematical point of view, it represents the proportion of circumference over diameter of a given circle and it is an irrational number and a universal constant. The meaning is that the constant roundness relates to the unity of nature and its irrationality relates to the lack of fixity, becoming of existence and the co-existing of contrary realities within the same individual; the truth is fragmented and fictionally negotiated.

Thus, Pi tells his story by distancing from himself and from the monadic truth and, doing so, the reader does not fully discriminate which version is true. The effect is intentional and its purpose is to stress the importance of imagination and the importance for not choosing a definite narrative: “Isn’t telling about something – using words, English or Japanese – already something of an invention?” (Martel chapter 99). The material imagination represents the human perspective on the material nature, yet both the imagining person and the imagined reality are parts of the same environment; imagination itself becomes immanent and material. The natural environment projects itself as text, becoming an agentive force which influences the human discourse: “The agency of matter, the interplay between the human and the nonhuman in a field of in a field of distributed effectuality and of inbuilt material-discursive dynamics relates to narrativity” (“Models of Narrativity” 79). Nonetheless, the process of anthropomorphism does not mean that the realm of nature and animals is linguistically and culturally conditioned by the human psyche; in fact, it stresses the horizontality of communication in the same plane of existence, an approach which is obviously anti-anthropocentric and biocentric.

In this sense, “the storied matter” (83) unfolds its own meanings and, in the process of becoming a text, displays a textual continuity and communion between the apparently heterogeneous discursive-material fragments of religion, culture, imagination, animals, objects, particles. All subjectivities become part of Pi’s “material self” (83) and “the corporeal dimensions human and nonhuman agencies...are inseparable from the very material world within which they intra-act” (84). Hence, Richard Parker and other hybrid animals take shape within the materiality of the same fictional discourse, which is both imaginative and real: “It was not a question of him or me, but of him and me. We were, literally and figuratively, in the same boat”. Here, the conjunction “and” coordinates two parts at the same level of

morphological existence in terms of their literal-real and figurative-imaginative materiality; Pi is Richard Parker: “It is the plain truth: without Richard Parker, I wouldn’t be alive today to tell you my story” (Martel chapter 57).

This process of becoming other, while remaining the same, is imagined in the novel through the act of cannibalism: “I stabbed him repeatedly...His heart was a struggle...It tasted delicious” (chapter 99). Cannibalism represents an act of consuming identities by subverting and deconstructing the opposition of self-other in order to preserve the former; this act relates to a cross-cultural approach. The void of losing one’s identity is filled by the identification with the other and, doing so, the fragmented self is reorganized and reshaped, and the binary opposition between the person who knows and the object of this knowledge is overcome. There is no more a difference between the act of knowing and the act of being. From a religious point of view, “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14), which means that the transcendent “Logos” embedded His “logoi” in this material reality, sharing the same immanent body with all the human and nonhuman beings. The advice “Take, eat; this is my body” (Matthew 26:26) also means that the liturgical and mystical act of cannibalism equals to a “material ethics” (“Models of Narrativity” 85) which “re-elaborates the horizon of human action according to a more complex, plural and interconnected geography of forces and subjects” (86)

Conclusion

Conceiving world as the body of God or as a goddess, the universe and the natural environment are, in this sense, holy and divine. This pantheist vision, in which the divine identifies with its creation, is different from the Western pantheist vision, in which God inhabits the world while remaining essentially transcendent. Thus, the transcendence is overcome by the pure plane of immanence, in which the natural system consists equally of gods, human beings and animals, along with the ecologies of plants and mineral elements. An ontic continuity of essence “transcends” the immanence of the world, in this way multiple hierarchies of power being canceled. The polytheistic pantheon ensures, in the same time, rhizomatic connections all over the cybernetic system, multiplicity being a theological condition to resist the radical monotheism. Furthermore, the apparent ascetic vision of the Nature’s rejection actually means that the scope is to unite or relate Brahman with atman, Dharma with karma, the universal Self with the individual self. In this way, individual subjectivities can sense the musical logos of Nature, find multiple agencies in it and continuously reborn within a natural environment.

Arguing that the multiplicity of religions has, in essence, the same transcendent God and Pi’s various theological thought and feelings share the same epistemological value, the reader ought to disseminate the fragmented fictional reality in order to negotiate the religious space, according to one’s subjective construction. There is no “better story” due to the fact that there is essentially one single story, of a boy who has become “more-than-human” (76) within a post-humanist space, where a reconciliation of “the materiality of our lives and of the life of the environment” (87) has occurred. The purpose of merging “knowing” with “being”, in a “differential becoming” and “partnership between different agents in creating reality” (84) is “to bridge the discursive and the material, the logos and the physis, mind and body” (87). In other words, Pi’s imagination works as a mystical and fictional device to marry different cultures, nationalities and religions in a single thread of (un)consciousness. His religious imagination, part of the multicultural discourse, is intrinsically embedded in the text of human civilization, which represents an objectified reality in the larger cybernetic system of the universe. The natural ecology, along with its nonhuman beings, exerts an agentive force towards the human discourse, becoming, in this way, a text. All gods, human beings, animals,

objects, particles, cultural and natural discourses and texts are incorporated in the same immanent and material reality. The means by which the epistemic observer fuses with the ontic observed, and vice-versa, consists in the ethical praxis of “doing”; the extent by which the human discourse influences nature equals to the influence of discursive Nature on culture.

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