

## **Biocentrism in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*: An Ecocritical Approach**

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Abstract: Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* develops the bond between human and non-human environment. While Ecocriticism deals with the relationship between language and the environment, Biocentrism treats all the beings of the universe equally. *Life of Pi* helps the reader to understand the relationship between two different beings in the universe and also analyse the relation between literature and the nature. The novel can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly biocentrism, when the story takes its course with the involvement of animals and humans in all three sections in zoo, in ocean and in Mexico where Japanese officials cannot find it true to believe in animal story but they readily accept human story (anthropocentrism). While the second manner of approaching the novel is through eco-centrism. This concept has been brought into force while giving the descriptions of certain places like France and Munnar, in the novel.

Key words: Biocentrism, Ecocriticism, Environment, Universe.

*Ecocriticism* takes up the challenge of bringing together two pairs of standoffish, if not openly antagonistic, critical perspectives: ecocriticism, and ecology vs. ‘zoocriticism,’ as the authors term the cultural study of animals. Dialogue between the first two, signaled in the book’s title, has been underway for a while, with a number of critics working to articulate the space between postcolonial and environmental studies (Cilano and Deloughrey, Huggan, Huggan and Tiffin, Nixon). The relationship between ecology and animals, which might seem intuitively more obvious, has been more fraught, for reasons explained by the narrator of J.M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* (1999):

In the ecological vision, the salmon and the river-weeds and the water-insects interact in a great, complex dance with the earth and the weather. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. In the dance, each organism has a role: it is these multiple roles, rather than the particular beings who play them, that participate in the dance. As for actual role-players, as long as they are self-renewing, as long as they keep coming forward, we need pay them no heed. (LA 53-54)

*Ecocriticism* offers a comprehensive summary and intelligent analysis of concerns and debates that define the terrain between and within the fields it surveys, including: differences, and potential connections, between Northern and Southern environmentalisms, the ambiguous legacies of development, the problem of subaltern (including non-human) agency, the way genre determines the scope of the postcolonial and eco/zoocritical imagination, and the necessary tension between activism and aesthetics.

Biocentrism as a concept outlines the conviction that “humans are neither better nor worse than other creatures (animals, plants, bacteria, rocks, virus) but simply equal to everything else in

the natural world” (Campbell 128). Biocentrism is an ecological term, which places equal emphasis on non-human species like animals, sea creatures, birds and land when compared with human species. Paul Taylor, a renowned philosopher, remarked once that man is in no way superior to other living creatures on earth. The earth belongs equally to non-human species and hence man should seek peaceful and harmonious way of co-existence with other species.

People concern for the environment became widespread during the 1960s, after Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*. Since that time, several different schools of thought have emerged with regard to the environment and the people roles are to play within the natural world. Biocentric and ecocentric philosophies are just two of the many different theories used to discuss nature. Although the philosophies are quite similar, they vary in some significant ways.

People who describe to an ecocentric philosophy believe in the importance of an ecosystem as a whole. They attribute equal importance to living and non-living components of ecosystems when making decisions regarding their treatment of the environment. It is a holistic school of thought that sees little importance in individuals; ecocentrists are concerned only with how individuals influence ecosystems as a whole.

In contrast, a biocentric philosophy places the greatest importance on living individuals or living components of the environment. Biocentric theories do not consider chemical and geological elements of the environment to be as important as living beings in the way that ecocentric theories. Biocentrists believe that all living things are equally important. For example, a tree's life would be considered just as important as a human's life. This is in contrast to an anthropocentric view in which the lives of humans are given the greatest value.

The primary difference between ecocentric and biocentric philosophies lie in their treatment of the abiotic environment. Ecocentrism uses the study of ecology to demonstrate the importance of non-living elements of the environment. Biocentrism focuses on living elements of the environment. For example, in the climate change debate, biocentrists would focus on how climate change influences living things by causing migration of species and alterations in wildlife habitats. Ecocentrists might use these factors in a similar argument, but they would also consider changes to the abiotic world while formulating their stance in the debate. Changing sea levels, weather patterns and ocean acidity are abiotic factors that would influence an ecocentrist's opinion on climate change.

Recording this bio-centric belief, the novel *Life of Pi* begins in a flashback tone where Pi's father has decided to transform some portion of Pondicherry Botanical Garden into a zoo. At that time Pi was only fifteen years old but it should be kept in mind that Pi's views stated in the novel were his current views when the author had gone to interview him, rather than being a young child's opinion which would have been easily overlooked. Though Pi's opinion about animals change with the furthering of the narrative but nowhere in the novel, does he find anything wrong in running a zoo.

In the beginning of novel *Pi* gives a review of few French rivers and pools which are made dirty by humans disposing off their waste in it. He learnt swimming from his father's friend, Francis Adirubaswamy, whom he called 'Mamaji.' He is a champion of a swimming competition of whole South India. So at the time of colonial rule Francis went to study in Paris where he became great swimmer. His all stories are related to the description of swimming in French pools. Talking

about one of the pools after which Pi was named 'Piscine Deligny,' Francis tells that in spite of being the venue for 1900 Olympics, its water was too dirty

“the water in the pool came straight from Seine, unfiltered and unheated. It was cold and dirty...The water, having crossed all of Paris, came in foul enough. Then people in the pool made it utterly disgusting. “In conspiratorial whispers, with shocking details to back up his claim, he assured that the French had very low standards of personal hygiene”. (LP10) Giving reference of other pool in the same place he says “There water was so much a gob and spit floating in the water, I thought I was swimming through jellyfish” (11)

Pi recounts that Pondicherry at that time had nearly no amusement source and hence running a zoo appeared to be a great idea to his father. Zoo was a kind of assurance of earning huge profits, as being the only amusement destination it would attract many visitors daily. It is pity that in this whole conception of doing business through wildlife, nobody thought about the everyday inconvenience of animals. But then again second thought should also be given to the place in question to be transformed. His father decided to transform botanical garden into a zoo. Incidents like these, serve an image of our present day society.

Life of Pi observes such stories daily in newspapers and magazines, where rich businessmen forcefully take away the fertile, irrigated, agricultural land for their construction sites. Sometimes even the deforestation is carried out in nearly acres of land for these construction sites. But it is very shocking that Pi too does not find any fault in this and justified his father's building of a zoo. The entire narrative of first part novel appears quite contradictory. Beginning with Pi's long speech where he explains the causes behind animal's death in zoo.

The obituary of zoo animals that have died from being fed foreign bodies would include gorillas, bison, storks,....and most variety of deer, ruminant and songbird. Among zookeepers, Goliath's death is famous, he was a bull elephant seal...He died of internal bleeding after someone fed him broken bottle (31).

Pi regarded visitors responsible for animal deaths who fling anything and everything inside the cages. He seemed to forget the fact that if anyone decides to run a business, the profit or loss of entire business rests on the owner. In the same way none other than Pi's father can be blamed for the concerned deaths. Consequently the truth that comes out is that hardly anyone is concerned about death of animals. The animal's death is rendered as just another death because society has completely isolated itself from all such problems which lie beyond their selfish ends. This is the only reason how people play games. As nobody has time to look into the reality of matter, which provides other people with a chance to mould truth and present it in whichever way they want.

Another aspect, of which Pi can be accused, is his idea of supporting the belief of caging animals. He does not find anything erroneous in ridding animals off their natural habitat and using them for amusement purposes. He gives many reasons to justify why zoos are better place for animals than an open territory but he overlooks the most important fact that freedom is valuable to everyone. Not only a person but nearly half of the world has experienced those times when the people were ruled by British. The people justified their need to secure freedom through revolts, movements depicting themselves as slaves and colonized who were ruthlessly exploited by colonizers. So is it difficult for a man to put animals in the same place and think about their state? By making them captive, the people are just replacing colonizers with themselves and colonized with the animals.

Later in the novel Pi's father decided to shift from Pondicherry to Canada, due to the occurrence of emergency. This decision was made bearing in mind the huge loss which his family had to suffer in times of emergency. Pi explains,

To prosper, a zoo needs parliamentary government, democratic elections, freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of association, rule of law and everything else enshrined in India's constitution....Long-term bad politics is bad for business. (79).

This makes it evident that he does not have any guilt conscience in taming animals and forcing them to live in confines. It is to be noted that his family does not find anything wrong with emergency except that emergency led people to stay back at their home. They do not think of emergency as social problem but only as their personal problem. This attitude of Mr Patel, the zoo owner, shows how intensely he is engrossed in making money. He not only decided to take his family abroad but also the animals of zoo too. He has planned to sell them there at high prices.

The scenic description of Munnar district of India is apt to relate the philosophy of religion and nature together. This place gives a new beginning to Pi's life because it is here where Pi developed the urge to know more about religion which in turn made him realise about the importance of earth. This theory of deep ecological religious belief goes hand in hand with the theory of ecocentrism which can better be described in the words of Pi.

I loved my prayer rug....wherever I laid it I felt special affection for the patch of ground beneath it and the immediate surroundings, which to me is a clear indication that it was a good prayer rug because it helped me remember the earth is creation of God and sacred the same all over. (76).

The novel begins with a theistic view and proceeds towards a pantheistic one. Before the commencement of his journey, Pi Patel is a theist, but after his journey (his spiritual and emotional rites of passage), he is a convert to a broader more fluid biocentric view. He sees himself as an element in the interconnectivity of things and the struggle for power over nature, wildlife yields to a worldview that is more mature, tolerant and eco-friendly. *Life of Pi* has to develop a parallel relationship between environment and literature which Yann Martel has not only dealt with the issues of environmental concern but also has hinted out the ways through which these problems can be skillfully handled.

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