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Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* from Canadian Literary Perspectives

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This literary research paper primarily sees Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* through the Canadian literary lenses. It tries to identify the canons of Canadian literature and sees the reflection of it in *Life of Pi* as a Canadian literary text.

Canadian Literature emerged from the earlier writings of travelling and exploring the unknown. It came out of the diaries, journals, letters and other notes written by the visitors, travelers, and explorers of British North America. Since then, this element has remained at its core in one or the other form of Canadian Literature. As Northrop Frye observed "Canadian literature is haunted by the overriding question of "Where is here?"; thus, metaphoric mapping of people and places became central to the evolution of the Canadian literary imagination." The established writers Margaret Atwood and Ruby Wiebe also reflect such literary influences. Topographical literary works have always been at the centre of Canadian literature. The subjects like the search of New World, encounters with the native people, nature, climate, unfamiliar wildlife, landscape, the historical romances, local colors, globalization, multicultural world with multi ethnic identity etc. have been recurring themes of Canadian literary world. The Canadian fiction writers have also explored various literary genres like letters, diaries, biographies, biofictions, docufiction, metafiction.

In brief, Canadian literature is broadly characterized by "failure as a theme, humor, mild anti-Americanism, multiculturalism, nature, satire and irony, self-deprecation, self-evaluation, search for self identity, the underdog hero, urban vs rural etc."

Many of these themes are reflected in the Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi* published in 2001. It won Man Booker Prize for Fiction in the same year. It is an adventurous story of Piscine Molitor known as Pi. As a Canadian literary text, the novel primarily explores the issues of spirituality, multi ethnic beliefs and mystery of nature. It shows the wrath as well as love and beauty of nature. It's a story of an Indian family/boy, set in India, written by French-Canadian writer. The writer stayed in many parts of the world including India for writing the novel. In that sense, it reflects the Canadian literary trait of travelling and multiculturalism.



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It's a story of an Indian boy Pi. He is born in Pondicherry, an Indo-French city of India. During his childhood, he learns lot about nature, religions, and animals. He practices all the religions or belief systems he comes across. He learns meticulously about animal psychology as his father owns a zoo. He likes very much a Bengali tiger named Richard Parker in their zoo. At his teenage, his father decides to leave India because of the economic crises. His whole family boards a ship with few animals to be sold later on. Unfortunately, the ship is caught in storm and wrecked. Pi could manage to save his life in a lifeboat but with a Bengali tiger and few other animal wherein, as time passes, Pi is left with the Bengali tiger only. From this point, his journey begins. During that time, he also meditates over the various belief systems, religions and nature of life.

The novel is interdisciplinary in nature as it gives scientific details of zoo and animals. It is long narrative of ethology. It is a type of metafictional text where the detailed scientific information about the animal psychology and zoo is narrated in a literary style. It also narrates the ocean, ships and boats in detail. At times, one feels as if one is reading about marine engineering and oceanography. But, even though scientific details are given about various disciplines, the readers are also told that it is a fiction and not scientific information book.

One can find many Canadian literary traits in *Life of Pi*. The very first thing is it's a topographical literary work. As it is said earlier nature has remained at the core of Canadian literature. This novel primarily explores nature and animals. The whole second part of the novel is set in an ocean. It narrates a day and night in an ocean. It narrates the sea-air, sea-green, sea-kale, sea-animals etc. It beautifies an island in the middle of an ocean. When the protagonist is at his home in Pondicherry, India at the beginning of the novel, his father owns a zoo. Here, factual details are given about the animals in the zoo and the places around. The zoo is shown as a different world. The traits and behaviors of the animals are observed deeply and articulated minutely. Hence, the novel is a topographical work and this is how it reflects the trait of the Canadian literature.

There was a movement in the Canada before few years for the search of the identity of Canada. It all ended with the conclusion that there was nothing that can actually be called Canada. Canada is more or less the reflection of British, French and Americans. There were aborigine people but they were colonized and exploited and their cultures and identities were not taken into consideration. Gradually, Canada became



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conscious about its existence and cultural identity. This consciousness led the Canadians towards the search for their identity. This mood of search for an identity is also reflected in literature and the search for a New World that reflects Canadianness becomes core to the Canadian literature. This Novel, *Life of Pi* depicts journey and search for destination. There is a journey of Pi's family from India to Mexico for better future. There is a journey of Pi from one faith to another to ultimately reach at 'the faith' or the God. He practices different faith systems or religion. He is the heir of Hinduism, he is drawn towards the idea of sin and love, that is Christianity. He also practices Islam. All these are the evident that Pi is on the journey for the search for his own self and for the 'ultimate' where he can put his faith on.

There is an odyssey of Pi and Richard Parker in the sea that covers a major part of the novel. After the frightful ship wreck, accidently Pi and the four other animals could save themselves in a life boat. Three animals out of four are killed as time passes and Pi is left with Richard Parker, the Bengali Tiger. Then the journey begins towards the unknown. During this journey the readers are shown the vast ocean with its beauty as well as hardships. This journey becomes revealing for Pi. He learns lessons of existence and faith during this period. At last, saving himself, he could reach on land and further new journey begins from there. It shows that we are constantly on move and in search of something ultimate. That is what the idea is at the core of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and all other religions. There is constant journey and search for the New World.

Confrontation of nature has also remained major theme of Canadian literature. The Canadian literature began with it. Earlier, when the travelers and explorers were exploring Canada, they noted down their experiences with the Canadian nature and the native people. From their diaries and travel notes, the Canadian literature emerged. Hence, confronting nature is at the centre of Canadian literature. Many writers like Margaret Atwood and others have been dealing with this theme. Even Eco-criticism, a division of literary criticism, emerged from these aspects. These aspects are aptly dealt by Martel in *Life of Pi*. Here, the protagonist through his journey of 227 days in the sea gets an opportunity to explore nature. He passes through many good as well as frightening experiences. The incident of the shipwreck itself is an example of nature's wrath. While, though Pi was with a tiger in the same boat for 227 days, he remained safe shows the compassion of nature.

The novel is about a detailed account of the laws of nature. It clearly shows that if we love nature, it loves back and if we fight with it, it fights back. Though Pi spends many days in a life boat with a tiger, he is not harmed. It shows that if we become friendly with animals, they do not kill, even though we believe that



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the very nature of a tiger is to kill. After being saved, Pi likes to remember those days in the sea with Richard Parker. That shows that sometimes, in human isolation, even the company of an animal is better. The animals are also helpful in emotional support.

The journey of Pi and Richard Parker on the same boat also shows that we, human beings and animals, are travelling on the same boat. If we harm animals and exploit nature we may be harming our own selves.

At one of the points, the Island also symbolizes nature. The Island is a blessing in day and evil in night. It says that if we treat nature humanly, it loves us and if we harm, it harms back as the water of the Island is nectar in day and poisonous at night.

Canada is broadly known as the multicultural nation. Because of the immigrants from European countries and numerous tribal communities, Canada has been a multicultural nation. It has also accepted the policy of multiculturalism officially. Hence, it has become a home for the people of different cultures all over the world. This trait is reflected by the writer himself. Martel is originally French, migrated to Canada earlier and because of his father's transferable job, has lived in many nations with different cultures including India. He is a sign of multiculturalism. His story also deals with this aspect. The story is written by a French-Canadian writer depicting the journey of an Indian boy travelling from one end to another end of the world. It richly deals with the Indian culture and also explores the different faith systems. It is a Canadian text as it is multicultural text.

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