

## Pi's Lifeboat, the Serpent or the Rope?

### A Vedantic Reading of Maya in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

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#### Abstract

Yann Martel's celebrated novel, *Life of Pi*, is most often read as a gripping tale of survival and a castaway narrative. Protagonist Piscine Molitor Patel known as Pi finds himself stuck on a lifeboat, his family gone Pi at the brink life contemplates petrifying situation that is now his shocking reality. Beyond its surface as a castaway narrative, however, the novel "is a religious allegory" (Kuriakose 140). Pi's faith forms a major thematic trope in the novel as it is a vital source of his strength and moral solace amidst his atrocious suffering in the wild. Thus, this article will attempt to trace the Vedantic tenet of Maya in the novel, *Life of Pi* on two levels. One, on its exploration of the polysemic narration and another on the level of Pi's ontological crisis as wherein his 227 days long tribulations, the shipwreck of Tsimtsum and Pi's crisis of faith are investigated under the lens of Maya. The paper shall attempt to prove that the novel within its narrative illusion and Pi's tribulations illustrates Indian philosophical tenet of Maya-illustrative of the Vedantic distinction between the empirical, illusory world of appearance i.e. the Maya v/s the ultimate, singular reality i.e. the Brahma.

**Keywords:** Life of Pi, Ontological Crisis, Tsimtsum, Advaita Vedanta, Maya, Narrative illusion, Brahma, Polysemic narration, Physical tribulations.

The novel delineates India as locus of religious pluralism; spiritually intense with its evolving cultural ethos "Through Pi's journey, Martel captures the spirit of India as a place of

profound spiritual depth, cultural complexity, and enduring faith” (Kumar 1). As we witness theological strands of religion and spiritual quest exemplified in the novel this article proffers a distinctive lens of Vedantic philosophy to read and the novel and reinterpret to comprehend how its spiritual underpinnings correspond to the Vedantic philosophy of Maya.

Adi Sankaracharya, 8<sup>th</sup> BC Vedic scholar and proponent of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy “perceived Maya as inexpressible discourse about the Brahma” (Roy 1) The essence of this philosophical framework, particularly as articulated by the Adisankara school of Vedanta, is further elucidated by the scholar S. Radhakrishnan as- "Brahma is the real, the universe is false, The Atman is Brahma. Nothing else" (Radhakrishnan 431). Coming from highly religious background Pi prays and practices religious rituals hoping to seek relief and a refuge from the tormenting wild that he finds himself. The thematic theological strands in the novel are an echo of the Vedantic premise that renders religious rituals and idolatry manifestations of God as Maya and not as the ultimate absolute truth i.e the Brahma. “Brahma associated with Maya termed as Ishwar (Saguna) belongs to the lower knowledge” (Radhakrishnan 446). Noteworthy aspect is that Martel has accentuated a significant aspect that divine is apprehended not through institutionalized religious practices or sacred edifices such as in the Churches, Mosques, or Temples but through intimate encounter with the real self. While Pi’s religious practices are carried out he himself is out of his element and out of the institutionalised religion and yet “Pi gets a new vision of God and a new faith by having to worship outside of institutional context” (Stephens 42).

Pi Patel’s journey in *Life of Pi* embodies an epistemological engagement with truth as encountered through the aesthetic and existential significance of nature, which he perceives as the authentic manifestation of divine creation. While contemplating Hinduism and its dogmas Pi defines Brahma as “Nirguna, without qualities, which lies beyond understanding, beyond description, beyond approach; with poor words we sew a suit for it- One, Truth, Absolute,

Ultimate Reality, Ground of Being- and try to fit but Brahma Nirguna always bursts the seams. We are left speechless” (Martel 48). This spiritual stance is seen panning out in the novel challenging the concept of objective truth as Pi is stranded in the ocean. He probes instead that truth is a subjective reflection of the divine vision, accessible only through intimate experience as a living being of nature instead of a man of civilization. Martel, hence goes onto define the Saguna Brahma as “a suit that fits... expressed not only on Gods but in humans, animals, trees, in a handful of earth, for everything has a trace of the divine in it” (Martel 48). In this evolving realization, the boundary between Pi and Richard Parker continues to blur as Pi confronts his own basal and primal needs that are similar to that of the tiger. There’s erosion of conventional binaries in which Pi understood himself and the tiger. Pi’s idea of self is dismantled as he has rather profound recognition of his own animacy. This convergence of identity with an animal maybe read as Pi’s experience of the Nirguna (formless) God wherein the Pi’s spiritual insight occurs in moments of solitude and interdependence on the lifeboat. Pi’s fear and compassion blend towards Richard Parker, the tiger and transcends into a contemplative awareness of self, world and thus the God as Nirgun.

Thus, this article will attempt to trace the Vedantic tenet of Maya in the novel, *Life of Pi* on two levels. One, on its exploration of the dubious narration of the novel and another on the level of Pi’s journey of his ontological survival as human wherein his 227 days long tribulations, the shipwreck of *tsimtsum* and Pi’s religious pluralist dogma against real spiritual faith are investigate under the lens of Maya. The paper shall attempt to prove that the novel illustrates within its narration and themes the Indian philosophical tenet of Maya- the Vedantic distinction between the empirical, illusory world of appearance i.e the Maya v/s the ultimate, singular reality i.e. the Brahma.

## **Vedanta and the Doctrine of Maya**

Before dissecting the literary text, it is crucial to establish a precise philosophical vocabulary. A nuanced understanding of the core tenets of Vedanta, especially the complex and often misrepresented doctrine of *Maya* as it provides the essential lens for this entire analysis. "Brahma Satyam Jagat Mithya, Jivo Bhahmaiva Naparah" is a core tenet of Advaita Vedanta as envisaged by Adi Shankaraharya translates to Brahma or the Absolute alone is real whereas the jagat i.e. the world is an illusion or Maya, and the jeeva or the individual life/creature is no different from the Brahm or the absolute. This framework illuminates the novel's structure not as a mere narrative gimmick, but as a sophisticated engagement with one of the most profound concepts rooted in Indian religious thought. Advaita Vedanta philosophy presents reality in two forms studies Roy and in her essay *Maya* as "Vyavaharika (empirical reality) and Paramarthika (absolute, spiritual reality). The empirical truth exists only for the moment, whereas spiritual truth lasts forever" (Roy 3) There's also a Monistic view wherein it is emphasized that the unity of all things is real and objective truth, abandoning the polytheism of the earlier Vedic age. The supreme agency, or unifying principle, was determined to be spirit. This ultimate spiritual principle in its unified idea was then called Brahma or the Absolute reality as against the idea that Universe was manifestation of the Brahma. In the Upanishadic view, the universe was not dismissed as illusory, but was explained as a product or manifestation of the Supreme Spirit (Brahma), this supreme spirit (Brahma) was then considered as the explanation of all thinking beings and the object of all thought. Brahma thence is recognized as immanent in the universe, an eternal spirit manifesting itself in all things.

The Vedanta system, as outlined by S. Radhakrishnan in his study *The Vedanta Philosophy and the Doctrine of Maya* postulate the existence of one absolute, undifferentiated reality called the Brahma. "The Vedanta system is supposed to be an acosmic pantheism, holding that the Absolute Brahma alone is real and the finite manifestations are illusory"

(Radhakrishnan 431). During the Vedic period, the universe in its material manifestation of the nature, humans, animals and million other species was perceived to be as real as the life itself. Vedic philosophers were driven by a demand for the explanation of actual tangible worldly experience, “realization of Brahma and self comes from understanding maya and rising beyond it” (Roy 2). Philosophy, for them, meant experiencing the essential nature around us, reality was knowing itself. The knowledge of existence and hence they sought to derive meaning from the tangible elements through which one derives knowledge thereby philosophizing to the incoherent and the chaotic around us. The reality, for these early sages, was generally the world of experience, not something necessarily rooted in extreme reason or empiricism. The later Vedanta of Adisankaracharya however, addresses this abstract and the sufferable reality through the doctrine of *Maya*, which signifies the illusory character of the finite, empirical world. To explain this complex idea, Adisankaracharya employed a series of powerful classical analogies. Among the most potent is the metaphor of a man in the dim light mistaking a piece of rope for a snake. The snake is an illusion, a projection of the mind onto the underlying reality of the rope “Māyā has an existence with Brahma” (Roy 2). Similarly, the world of distinct subjects and objects is a projection, an illusion, superimposed upon the singular reality of Brahma.

On further critical inspection of the same Radhakrishnan argues that the strict illusionism is a "graft of a later growth" (Radhakrishnan 432) on the Vedantic system and not the original Indian Vedanta. He contends that in the primitive sense the world is as real as Brahma, the absolute reality, just as earthen pots are as real as the clay from which they are formed. The doctrine of *Maya* as pure illusion was, in the view of some historical Indian thinkers cited by Radhakrishnan, considered "crypto-Buddhistic" (Radhakrishnan 433) a later import into the original Vedantic framework. This distinction is critical, as Martel's novel does

not simply present a choice between truth and illusion, but rather explores the very nature of reality as a meaningful, story-like modification of an underlying, ineffable truth.

Taking into account both the school of thoughts- that of the Vedant's and Adisankara's Advait Vedanta this literary analysis of *Life of Pi* will consider *Maya* as the phenomenal world of appearance that simultaneously veils and reveals the ultimate reality to its seekers. The narrative of the novel engages with the quest for truth as experienced via nature's aesthetic and existential essence, viewing it as the genuine expression of divine creation. Martel masterfully embeds into the narrative structure of *Life of Pi* a narrative tale that doesn't aim to superimpose one version of reality over the other rather opens the "which story do you prefer? Which is the better story?" (Martel 317) mimicking Vedantic value that the worldly reality is not the final, it is not the absolute truth but an infinite quest, one that continues instead of cementing any which version of reality or truth. This infinite is akin to the divine, Brahma as the infinite ocean in the novel embodies spiritual landscapes of uncertainty, faith, and rebirth, contrasting with the finite human struggles.

### **Pi's Mayan Ontological Crisis**

*Life of Pi* that posits itself as a castaway narrative is a deep spiritual parable of "Pi's voyage is a spiritual odyssey from the earthly to the heavenly in his existential suffering" (Nayak 174). The fictional characters and their ontological realities are dependent on the author as they are constructed beings whose existence is given by the text and driven by the plot rather than any empirical reality, readerly engagement and thematic interrogation however leads us to sympathize with Pi as an adolescent surviving in his basest human form with the wildest creations of nature- Richard Parker, the tiger who matches the ferociousness of the brutal oceanic ethos that Pi finds himself trapped into. Within this allegorical framework, the tiger Richard Parker operates as a potent metaphor for Pi's ontological destabilization or crisis as a believer. As readers indulge in the story of Pi it seems like an illusion, *Maya* here though has a

purpose. It is often through Maya and its manifestation that truth is approached and reapproached just as the “Brahma is the cause of origin preservation and re-absorption in the world” (Radhakrishnan 447).

Richard Parker, naturally a carnivore is unhesitant in killing to satisfy his bodily needs, Pi whereas owing to his oceanic wreck reluctantly embraces savagery. Martel here has critiqued religious dogmas that associate themselves through vegetarianism and strict moral code of conduct though Pi is killing on the outside, he’s spiritually evolving inside. A nuanced reading acquaints readers with his spiritual transformation wherein Pi externally is seen engaging in brutality internally however it is to endure starvation and sustain storms. Moral and religious extremists may content that hardships are the true litmus test of a person’s ethics and character however the novel is also a bildungsroman of sorts that maps Pi’s psychological journey from childhood to maturity and thus it maybe imperative to note that Pi's quest for spirituality though begins even before the shipwreck of Tsimtsum. From the pluralistic worship of a God (which directly attributes to the formless Absolute) to the novel's ultimate equation of dismantling all forms of faith to illustrating the Vedantic theme of “teenaged Pi is in motion between continents, faiths and between childhood and adulthood” (Stephens 42) as he identifies with a religious enthusiasm, rejoices in comfort of religious pluralism. He practices Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam simultaneously driven and comforted in his sole desire "to love God" (Martel 69). His inclusive ways though are met with condescending attitudes from the local pandit, priest, and imam to which Pi realises “that it is on the inside that God must be defended not on the outside” (Martel 71). Tsimtsum, its fatal end and the consequent personal loss only further Pi’s spiritual pilgrimage that was already in way. “But it was hard... Faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act” (Martel 208). After the shipwreck of Tsimtsum, Pi was destined to inevitable sink- both literally and metaphorically and yet miraculously he survives. “I know my survival is hard to believe when I look back I can hardly believe it

myself” (Martel 223) Pi at the brink of his survival spiritually transcends from one ideology to another denoting that Pi's journey is that of a soul navigating the "sea of Karma" in search of the Absolute Truth i.e. “a pilgrimage on the sea of Karma to be united with the Absolute, a metaphor of the Atman seeking to realize Brahma” (Kuriakose 138). Maya too like a cataclysmic change that transcends as seen in the instant case- from regretfully and tearfully catching fish Pi evolves to brutally clubbing them- this shift is symbolic of Pi's ontological involvement. In the presence of a savage Pi is seen resorting to violence and savagery and readers are compelled to see his latent brutality exposing itself akin to the tiger. It was Richard Parker that boosts Pi's survival as a human against the force of nature, “without Richard Parker I would not be alive to tell you my story” (Martel 182). The tiger lends purpose and meaning to Pi sustaining his will to withstand utter disassociation from the humane world and isolation. In paralleling Richard Parker's ferocity Pi's ontological arc maps from innocence to maturity, from naïve practitioner of all faiths to spiritually evolved human through sadhana or devotion which “culminated in the vision of a radiant Being who finally merged into the Absolute” (Kuriakose 139). Pi's relationship with tiger was his sadhana, his way to reach God- “I had to tame him. It was at that moment that I realized this necessity. It was not a question of him or me, but of him and me. We were, literally and figuratively, in the same boat. We would live – or die – together” (Martel 164).

### **The Maya of Tsimtsum**

The shipwreck of Tsimtsum hence can be studied as a launch to the transformative quest that Pi undergoes. “The ship sinks and along with, sinks Piscine's innocence” (Rana 6). The sinking of the cargo ship Tsimtsum, is the cataclysmic event that violently strips Pi of all worldly attachments. This event's significance is encoded in the ship's name, a term from Jewish Kabbalistic belief that means constriction or a finite space. The famous opera composer Richard Wagner has extensively made use of the symbol of Tsimtsum in his music to signify

that world is a liminal space, devoid of divinity, a space where man's free will exists but only as an illusion. In the Hindu Vedantic concept Tsimtsum would be construed as a metaphor of Mayan (illusionary) world that proffers a limited and constricted view that which is illusionary, existing in the absence of divine reality of the Brahma. The shipwreck is the Tsimtsum is both, an event of significance in itself and a cataclytic one that streams a chain of events beyond our preconceived value systems and presumptive ideations which is further allegorised in the journey that ensues. This cataclysmic withdrawal of Pi's known reality -of family, settlements is a void that necessitates the creation of a new meaning of reality where everyday is a struggle of life. Tsimtsum thus becomes the catalytic force that is quintessential to Pi's transient journey from his known reality of tangible familial bonds Maya to his spiritual engagement with the formless but absolute reality of Brahma. "I saw my suffering for what it was, finite and insignificant" (Martel 177).

### **Maya manifested in Pi's tribulations**

Pi's struggle for life on the boat is inseparable from his spiritual transformation. The tale also underscores Pi's insufferable endurance as a futile experience aligning with the idea of Vedanta that corporeal sufferings are Maya and "realization of Brahma and self comes from understanding maya and rising beyond it" (Roy 3) Pi's maritime trial mirrors a sacred pilgrimage across the ocean of Karma, where the individual soul (Atman) strives for unity with the supreme reality (Brahma) as read from the lens of Advait Vedanta. His 227-day ordeal is not just a test of endurance but a classic allegorical pilgrimage and 227day span is significant in itself. It aligns with the mathematical constant  $\pi$  which in its decimal expansion is infinite and mirrors the boundless, unpredictable nature of existence, where meaning cannot be limited. This ties into Piscine Patel's journey from a confined swimming pool existence to the infinite possibility of oceanic truth that Pi experiences at the Pacific Ocean. This is deeply metaphoric of Pi's spiritual voyage which on the prima facie appears about of his survival in suffering-

“the rest of the story is nothing but grief, ache and endurance” (Martel 283) but is a philosophical allegory of a spiritual transcendence towards self-discovery and inner growth “the lower you are, the higher your mind will want to soar” (Martel 283).

Maya again manifests itself upon reaching Mexico when Richard Parker, the tiger abruptly departs without any farewell to Pi “at the edge of the jungle he stopped... I was certain he would turn my way... in some way conclude our relationship. He did nothing of the sort... moved forward and disappeared forever from my life” (Martel 284-85). This scene signifies that connections that humans form in adversity are Maya, illusionary and temporary sustained by necessity only. Richard Parker’s indifferent exit deemed sentimental bonds and mortal connections insignificant. This depiction cements the idea that Maya dominates most of our mortal experiences signifying that relationships dissolve as soon as they become inconvenient, rendering mortal attachments meaningless. It suggests that faith is not only a means of coping but transformative. Faith is transcending from one ideology to another, faith is a catalysmic change that transcends into new meanings arising out of catastrophes and often sufferings. “Everything suffered. Everything became sun bleached and weather beaten” (Martel 238).

### **Dual and Polysemous Narration**

“From the first page on, Martel’s story challenges the notion that a firm line can be drawn between fantasy and reality-fiction and objective facts” (Stephens 43). The novel’s narrative appeal is the choice, presented to its readers of two starkly contrasting stories - one of the utopian human endurances and the other of anthropocentric savagery. In the former version “which consumes a bulk of the novel” (Morse 2) readers see before them an unfolding of the fantastical world of Piscine. Rather than a bland predictable Robinsonade sort of tale Martel proffers up an enlightening (almost Mayan) perspective of a biocentric tale of Pi’s bond with Richard Parker immersed in brutal yet natural oceanic ethos. Richard Parker functions as Pi’s ferocious alter ego, the allegorical form he employs for himself (Rana 9) to represent the

primal "animal instinct of a survivor" he was forced to adopt. The process of taming the tiger is a form of spiritual discipline (*sādhanā*) representing the journey of the Self (*Atman*) coming to terms with the totality of its own nature. This taming of the inner beast is not only a spiritual discipline, but as Rana's trauma-focused reading suggests, it is also a psychological coping mechanism, a way for Pi to compartmentalize and manage the savage acts necessary for enduring that his conscious self would otherwise reject. Combining this with the Vedantic tenant of *Maya* one may choose to dismiss Pi and his existence with Richard Parker, as a fantastical fiction or the figment of author's imagination but as the critics might have it, "it is in part an ascent narrative, a journey towards enlightenment" (Stephens 41). This cosmic journey of Pi is mystical and in parts unbelievable positing itself as a compelling allegory for the search of truth where Pi not only survives but spiritually thrives.

The dubious narration that the novel offers is that of the "construction of the fictional-world-within-fictional world" (Septiana 14) and it helps to demonstrate how *Maya* is constructed and reconstructed within the novel vis-à-vis presenting two versions of reality as described earlier i.e." *Vyavaharika* (empirical reality) and *Paramarthika* (absolute, spiritual reality)" (Roy 3). *Life of Pi* in its dual narrative, presented at the novel's conclusion is not merely a literary device of perceptions but the primary vehicle through which Martel allegorizes the philosophy of *Maya*. The choice offered to the Japanese investigators, and by extension the reader, is a direct parallel to the philosophical choice between accepting the world as a spiritually meaningful story or as a cold, material fact. "Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* is a story on perspectives" (Morse1).

The first story of Pi's oceanic experience offered to the Japanese Police Officers Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba which constitutes the vast majority of the novel, is the fantastical and harrowing tale of Pi's 227-day on a lifeboat with a zebra, a hyena, an orangutan, and a magnificent Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. This first narration is enriched with wondrous

and miraculous events—a reality that seems unbelievable yet provides a semblance of meaning, purpose, and the spiritual sustenance to Pi. It is, as Pi's childhood swim instructor Francis Adirubasamy promises in the author's note, the story that "will make you believe in God" (*Life of Pi* x). This narrative functions as the Vedantic serpent: appealing and compelling in appearance that structures Pi's reality instead it is the rope, the higher truth. Arguably though, the manifestation of this Brahmic divinity is the Maya that inflicts Pi. His illusionary bouts that made his feeble, edgy existence seem endurable, the "gentle asphyxiation... my dream rag" (Martel 236) helps Pi find purpose in chaos. His "extraordinary dreams, trances, visions, thoughts, sensations, remembrances" clearly elements of Maya and yet they bring structure amid the infinite expanse of oceanic vastness that surrounded him (Martel 236).

The second story is offered only after the first is rejected as unbelievable by the Japanese investigators. It is a terse account of survival with humans: a French cook (the hyena), Pi's mother (the orangutan), a sailor (the zebra), and Pi himself (the tiger). This narrative represents the underlying, empirical reality—the Vedantic "rope" that was mistaken for the "snake." Owing to preconceptions and irrational fears. As scholar Morse notes, "The second story is cold, brutal" and tragically, "not difficult to believe" which implies that illusionary world is appealing, delusions are easily believed whereas the absolute truth is often rejected. Maya thus stems from our ignorance as in the case of the Japanese investigators, it then limits or restricts access to knowledge of truth, "knowledge is Brahma" as understood by Max Mueller in his treatise on Upanishads (Radhakrishnan, 436). Maya thus is the world of spiritual darkness, a depiction of what Martel, in his author's note, calls "crude reality" (Martel, xii).

The pivotal moment comes when Pi presents the choice. After recounting the horrific "dry, yeast less factuality" (Martel 63) of the human story, he asks the investigators a simple question: "So which story do you prefer?" (Martel 317). They choose the story with the animals

as “the better story functions much like redemption songs, giving meaning to suffering and hope to seemingly hopeless circumstances” (Stephens 43).

### **Conclusion**

Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* is a masterfully constructed modern parable of the Vedantic philosophy of Maya especially in the way Pi attains unprecedented spiritual awakening. As the novel begins reader see Pi as a polytheistic boy embracing vegetarianism and all ethical underpinnings of religious dictats including ahimsa or non violence and yet Pi experiences constant state of doubt. Whereas bereft of civilization tethering at the edge of nature, amidst the brutal ocean and in the company of a wild creature Pi has spiritual epiphanies transcending beyond the devotional paradigms as understood within the constraints of institutionalized religion.

There's also Maya in it's much venerated dual-narrative structure which is not simply a postmodern narrative gimmick but a profound allegorical device that forces a choice between two distinct orders of reality. Their response is telling. They are choosing to see the "rope" of crude reality as having undergone a real and meaningful modification into the "serpent" of the spiritual narrative. Their choice elevates a mere preference for a pleasant fiction to an embrace of reality as a divinely-ordered story, accepting Maya not as a deceptive lie, but as a purposeful narrative that serves as the most potent path toward the Absolute. In the later version of the tale thus we see the narrative shrinking down to match the confines of human reasoning. By positing competing realities though, the text raises fundamental ontological predicaments that challenge the reader's ability to discern only that truth which is conveniently comprehensible as against swallowing the difficult and objective truth.

*Life of Pi* presents to its readers a worldview, a version of truth that's deep rooted in Pi's self-conceptualised veracity of his 227 days spent on the lifeboat. The voyage that ensues “is a religious allegory... pilgrimage of Atman seeking to realize Brahma” (Kuriakose 140).

To fully appreciate this allegorical depth, however, one must delve into the complex philosophical framework upon which we propose to study the novel's spiritual questionings. Any truth that dismantles their perceived reality is outrightly rejected is but manifestation of Maya.

“The trees were not parasite... the island was not an island... the fruit was not a fruit” (Martel 280) Pi's musings on the carnivore island advances a nuanced spiritual discourse that the quest for truth or Brahma breaks through our worldly illusions. This final adventurous encounter of Pi in the novel posits that Brahma is in communion with nature and personal experience over adherence to rigid religious dogmas. “The story of the novel draws on reader's response of belief or disbelief to the story of Pi's struggle for survival” (Nayak 170). The novel thus reveals that individuals engage with truth based on their established beliefs, values, or identity and tend to reject or discredit the truth that's inconvenient. One person's version of truth maybe unbelievable to another hence the later censures the former of being delirious or more simply in a state of illusion i.e Maya.

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