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CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL



FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Narration and Religion in Yann Martel's

Novel *Life of Pi*

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the role of narratives as key elements to face, understand and endure human experience. Religion emerges in Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi* as one among different narratives that human beings use in order to impose order on and find comfort in a chaotic, harsh world. Literature, therefore, appears to function in similar ways as religion. Pi's experience while stranded in the sea after the shipwreck in which his family perished reaches the reader through two very different accounts: one realistic and horrific that tests the limits of human cruelty and violence when people face extreme situations; another, wondrous and fantastic, with Pi sharing the lifeboat with a Bengal tiger until he was rescued. These two different versions of a single experience address the unreliability of story-telling as well as the faith in it, which is similar to that in religion when it comes to help human beings to overcome extreme situations or traumas. The novel's open ending invites reflection about the connection between narrative and religion.

KEY WORDS

Religion, agnosticism, atheism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam

RESUMEN

Este documento se centra en el papel de las narraciones como elementos clave para enfrentar, comprender y soportar la experiencia humana. La religión aparece en la novela de Yann Martel *La vida de Pi* como una entre diferentes narraciones que los seres humanos

utilizan con el fin de imponer el orden y encontrar consuelo en un mundo duro y caótico. La literatura, por lo tanto, parece funcionar de manera similar a la religión. La experiencia de Pi mientras se encontraba atrapado en medio del Océano, tras el naufragio en el que su familia pereció, llega al lector a través de dos historias muy diferentes: una realista y horrible que pone a prueba los límites de la crueldad humana y la violencia cuando las personas se enfrentan a situaciones extremas; otra, maravillosa y fantástica, con Pi compartiendo el bote salvavidas con un tigre de Bengala hasta que fue rescatado. Estas dos versiones diferentes de una única experiencia abordan la falta de fiabilidad de la narración de historias, así como la fe en ellas, que es similar a la religión a la hora de ayudar a los seres humanos para superar situaciones o traumas extremos. El final abierto de la novela invita a la reflexión sobre la relación entre la narrativa y la religión.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Religión, agnosticismo, ateísmo, hinduismo, cristianismo, islam

Introduction

Over the centuries the story about the origin of the world has generated much debate among scientists and religious people, creating a large gap between them. For some people, the universe was originated from a great explosion that triggered a lot of energy and gave rise to the world we know today. On the other hand, other individuals believed that the world has a divine origin and was created by God. The novel which this work deals with, *Life of Pi*, addresses this issue in which each person has their own power of choice to choose their own beliefs. The novel's protagonist, Piscine Molitor Patel, also known as Pi, is a young Indian boy, who after a shipwreck in the ocean, lost his family and found himself in a lifeboat with a single survivor, a Bengal tiger. Finally, when he reached land and told his story of survival, the investigators of the shipwreck considered it unbelievable. Then, he decided to tell another story in which the animals were replaced with people. This second version is heart-breaking. Pi let them choose the story they prefer; thus, there is an open ending in which the reader, too, can select which end they wish for the story. The author of this work, Yann Martel is a Canadian writer who was born on June 25, 1963 in Salamanca and reached its greatest fame after the publication of this book, winning awards such as the Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction and the 2002 Asian / Pacific American Award for Literature. In addition he sold more than 12 million copies worldwide and the novel's adaptation to the cinema won great acclaim worldwide. The author covers topics such as the connection between narrative, religion and reality. In his own words: "reality is a story and we can choose our story and so why not pick "the better story" (Hamilton and Jones 260). Yann Martel's 2002 novel *Life of Pi* demonstrates how humanity uses religion as a way to give an order to a disordered world. The aim of my analysis is to show how the author uses a 'fable' in order to demonstrate how mankind seeks refuge in religion, trying to give answers in a world full of unresolved questions.

Animal symbolism in the novel

Pi tells a story whose main characters are animals. He attributes them emotions that humanize them. In the first story, the animals are used to embody different humans, that is, in order to make reality palatable Pi replaces humans with animals. In the second story, he narrates the same story, but this time the main characters are humans, so that it could be said that the humans have a personality with animal features. The novel presents two parallel stories, Pi survived to an awful experience, the loss of his family, his arrival in another country, thanks to his capacity to transform reality into story, the one based on animals; he could endure his own situation. Humans have the necessity to understand their life through narrations, whether religious or scientific ones.

Next, I will provide a survey of the different animal characters in Pi's tale and explain their behaviour as that corresponding to the various humans that shared with Pi the experience of the shipwreck and their struggle for survival in the little boat. The hyena, to start, represents the cook of the ship. In the animal story the hyena kills the zebra and the orang-utan while in the boat. In the second version of the story the hyena represents evil on earth but Pi keeps his faith even without hope "And the hyena bit off the zebra's leg just as the cook cut off the sailor's" (311)

The orang-utan, Orange Juice, who was very protective and showed motherly instincts, represents Pi's mother Gita. "To the end she reminded me of us: her eyes expressed fear in such a humanlike way, as did her strained whimpers" (131). She was also mother of two sons and after the hyena killed the Orang-utan Pi was desolated and full of pain "The cook killed the sailor and his mother" (311). When Pi was rescued and told his story, the two interviewers were also conscious about the relation between both stories, identifying the orang-utan with Pi's mother (311).

The zebra represents the sailor whose leg was amputated by the cook. Both of them represent the suffering through which the animal and the young boy passed “The sailor was young [...] he broke his leg jumping from the ship and his suffering made him a child.” (Martel 304)

Finally, the most striking character is the tiger which depending on which story the reader believes, Richard Parker could be a real tiger or part of the innermost Pi's personality “so the Taiwanese sailor is the zebra, his mother is the orang-utan, the cook is... the hyena- which means he's the tiger!” (Martel 311). He is totally dependent of Pi as he is the one who provided him with food and water. Richard Parker is a savage animal, while the novel unfolds Pi shows the same characteristics as the tiger with his behaviour at the sea. Furthermore, Richard Parker was his motivation in the ocean, the animal was the one with gave him enough strength to survive. “It was Richard Parker who calmed me down. It is the irony of this story that the one who scared me witless to start with was the very same who brought me peace, purpose, I dare say even wholeness.” (Martel 162). Richard Parker was his companion and as Pi says was the force which kept him alive (Martel 285).

The connection between the animal world and religion is clear throughout the book: “I know zoos are no longer in people's good graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions of freedom plague them both.” (Martel 19). Each animal has a different representation in the story, that is, their features are portrayed in humans; Pi uses animals to hide human's sins. Finally he asked the two officials which story they preferred, the interpretation is subjective if the reader is a person who prefers to believe in things that he or she can see “You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want dry, yeastless factuality” (Martel 302). On the contrary, if the reader is a person who has faith. This story is directly linked with religion and theology so the

end is opened to different interpretations as in life. Thus, the author allows the reader to choose what he or she wants to believe in life.

The Role of Religion in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

In order to understand this novel it is essential to focus on religion and the different perspectives that human beings have about it. Yann Martel demonstrates that his common knowledge on religion goes above average. People usually find themselves vaguely indoctrinated into a specific religion:

We are all born like Catholics, aren't we – in limbo, without religion, until some figure introduces us to God? After that meeting the matter ends for most of us. If there is a change, it is usually for the lesser rather than the greater; many people seem to lose God along life's way. That was not my case. (47)

The author presents a variety of religious perspectives through its protagonist. Pi's initial contact with religion was at an early age as he grew up involved in Hinduism's rites and rituals. However, he was soon introduced to Christianity and Islam, and he understands that the main monotheist religions are related to Hinduism in that they all revolve around the idea of love: "Brahman and atman relate precisely, I would say in the same way the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit relate: mysteriously" (49) for as truly as "Hindus, in their capacity for love, are indeed hairless Christians, just as Muslims, in the way they see God in everything, are bearded Hindus, and Christians, in their devotion to God, are hat-wearing Muslims" (50) Although Pi was born Hindu, he didn't figure out who he really was until he found two religions that charmed him and carried him much closer to God, his beliefs being more concerned with faith than with religion. Through the love and interior peace that these practices provided him he could define his identity, being faith the bedrock of his life.

Furthermore, Pi's virtue of being open minded enables him to know different traditions and communities and finally accept different religions as an essential part of himself.

The next spiritual awakening that Pi experiences takes place years later with the Christian faith. His first impression about Christianity was induced by its violent reputation but his first involvement with it brought him the idea of a place "neat, plain, simple. I was filled with a sense of peace" (Martel 52) in reference to the building where he met this religion, the church. On this basis, and building on the priest's aura Pi is fulfilled by a sense of love and guidance. At this point, the main character is led by this priest, Father Martin, who explains the story of Christ, at the basis of Christianity and built on love. During the several encounters with Father Martin Pi struggles to understand God's behaviour. As time goes on, Pi desires to get closer to God and this religion, as he states during his last encounter with the Father:

"Father, I would like to be a Christian please."

He smiled. "You already are, Piscine—in your heart. Whoever meets Christ in good faith is a Christian. Here in Munnar you met Christ." (57)

That church, which brought him harmony at first, finally has become his home. Both Christianity and Hinduism wouldn't be his last connection with God.

One year later, Pi gets acquainted with Islam when he accidentally meets a humble baker who showed him the precepts of this religion: "It felt good to bring my forehead to the ground. Immediately it felt like a deeply religious contact" (61). With this last religious revelation he felt the unity of all the elements of the universe, living in harmonious relationship: "I knelt a mortal; I rose an immortal" (62).

Pi's religious standpoint is influenced at an early stage by his biology teacher, Satish Kumar. He was the first atheist he ever met. Pi makes a positive statement about atheism: "I

felt a kinship with him . . . atheists are my brothers and sisters of a different faith . . . like me they go as far as the legs of reason will carry them” (28). Through Kumar, Pi learned the compatibility of logic and religion: “When Mr. Kumar visited the zoo . . . his stethoscopic mind always confirmed to him that everything was in order, that everything was order” (26). Thanks to Pi’s broadmindedness once again, he goes beyond human standards and oversteps Kuman’s beliefs placing science and religion at the same level. Pi believes that religion can coexist with science, and he doesn’t limit his knowledge completely to either one. He studied zoology and religion at university, the reason why he studied zoology was due to the influence of his high school teacher, since he saw the zoo as the sanctuary of his atheism: “There are no grounds for going beyond a scientific explanation of reality and no sound reason for believing anything but our sense experience” (27). Pi was able to understand his point of view but in some way he believed that atheists as Mr. Kumar worship science as he does God.

Finally the only discordant thought is agnosticism: “I’ll be honest about it. It is not atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics. Doubt is useful for a while . . . But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation” (28).

Paradoxically Yann Martel creates a character totally opposite to the average human being, allowing Pi to have an open mind that allows him to be polyreligious, as all religions, he concludes, have the same goal: “‘How many nations are in the sky?’ . . . ‘One. That’s the point. One nation, one passport.’ . . . , “If there’s only one nation in the sky, shouldn’t all passports be valid for it?’” (73,74). Pi comes to the realisation that the founding principle of existence is what we call love. Pi doesn’t intend to indoctrinate the reader in one

particular religion, but stresses the importance of having faith: “Bapu Ghandi said, ‘All religions are true.’ I just want to love God” (69).

Literature as an instrument with which to give order and meaning to human existence

In the novel the different religions appear as ‘narrations’ that help us to endure and make sense of human existence. But the belief in science, and the discourse of progress, reason and modernity are also shown as another kind of narrative. This connection between religion, science and literature, or narrative, is central to Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*. Hence, literature, or story-making, emerges as the pillar that sustains religion and science.

Religion is the act of believing in a superior controlling being or existence (Oxford Dictionary) as an attempt to achieve faith and hope for the future. In fact, “literature and religion lie at the very roots of culture . . . where human speculation on the self and the universe was expressed through myths, stories and poetry (Detweiler et al. xi).

Pi’s adventure in the ocean immerses the reader into an existential quest for faith and reason. This theory agrees with R. Detweiler’s point of view:

“What we learn from the practice of religion and the experience of literature is the root and origin of community and culture . . . From these narratives communities begin to form, in turn appropriating the narratives—as we see, for example in the earliest stories of the Bible or in the Gospels—and it is within these living communities that we realize ourselves and our identities”. (xiv).

From the beginning of history, religion has been closely related with literature, every country and civilization has a large record of texts about their history and religious activities. Thus, their existence started to centre on their beliefs, defining their character “We are our stories. We become our stories. And sometimes these stories are taken from the communal

imaginings that have been disciplined for public sharing. As public, they are visible psyches to us” (Wiggins and Crites 115).

This common knowledge of a certain community is spread into each inhabitant conscience, thus, those narratives become part of us. Yann Martel’s work also deals with the understanding of different stories: “The world isn’t just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn’t make life a story?” (302). Pi’s understanding of life goes hand by hand with the believing of different stories as he is not limited to the tangible world, he goes beyond it until he can attain his own truth.

The influence of religion has been so deep in history that our roots are influenced by it. From the beginning, religion found its way into every area of life, from family to politics, sport to work, architecture... (Kinght and Mason 10). Like religion, science also tries to find an explanation for the creation and the origin of humanity: “Science and religion meet in the myths of time and space and the concern of the origins of being”. (Detweiler et al. 17).

At the end, a people decide upon their own beliefs, and persevere despite the difficulties that it entails “Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer” (Martel 297). Pi’s guide of life was to keep his knowledge strong but his faith stronger “The blackness would stir and eventually go away, and God would remain, a shining point of light in my heart. I would go on loving” (Martel 209).

As a conclusion, story-making and story-telling are found at the core of science as well as of religion, making literature a paramount element of human existence. As Paul Pruyser states: “Without stories, no religion” (Wiggins and Crites ix).

Conclusions

The novel speaks of faith above religions, leaves free your own interpretation "and imagination", reflection and judgment of the amazing things that happen. It talks about the loss of innocence, the inner doubts, experiences ... And all this from a small lifeboat. Still, you can appreciate the novel of two ways: simple, as the adventure of a young tiger in the sea, or other more committed, and guess a metaphor for life and human beliefs. In this way, it all comes down to the importance of narrations; they are those stories that facilitate human understanding of the world at the same time that help human beings to endure the reality that surrounds them. Thus, religion appears in this novel as one among the different narrations which the humanity uses in order to structure their lives and find order within a chaotic world. Therefore, in this novel narrative and religion go hand in hand, after the first story that Pi relates, despite being plagued with fantastic elements and animals as protagonists, is the story that appears to be true at the end of the book; at this point it demonstrate how blind faith works, choosing your own beliefs as in religion. Then, the lack of trustfulness in a story brings to light the faith on it; the novel opens the reader mind to the relation between faith and narration.

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