Fishing for Faith: The Postcolonial Reclamation of Hunger in *Life of Pi*

Yann Martel's novel, *Life of Pi*, tells the harrowing story of Piscine Patel's journey across the Pacific in a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger. However, during an interview with authorities after washing up on shore (Martel 303-311), a second story of human brutality and desperation questions the veracity of Pi's original narrative and the purpose of fact, perspective, and faith in establishing a personal identity. In 2012, the eponymous film was released, bringing to life the philosophical and surreal journey, despite the visually challenging nature of such a work, posing noteworthy alterations to the book's intimate narration of belief and power. Pi's journey across the Pacific becomes a postcolonial reclamation of power as he learns to fully embrace his spiritual hunger.

Martel initiates this narrative by establishing Western colonization's search for power as synonymous with cannibalistic hunger, as it harms non-Western, particularly Eastern cultures, victimized by the desolation of native "resources" for the profit of imperialist powers. In the second story, the animals become symbolic extensions of the deaths he witnessed, allowing Pi to cope with the traumatic events. As Mr.Chiba summarized after Pi gave his second account: "So the Taiwanese sailor is the Zebra, his mother is the orangutan, the cook is…the hyena- which means he's [Pi] the tiger" (Martel 311). However, this projection introduces the possibility for additional symbolism to be applied through a postcolonial critique. Nevertheless, it is essential to keep in mind the anthropological limitations of such an analysis, as Bartosch explains: "Zoomorphism on the part of the colonizers has been a powerful tool to degrade the colonized, and a sense of an expanded family of human and nonhuman animals seems to link with claims of the 'bestiality' of the colonized and with racist discourses" (189). While there is an innate

difference between the control of zoo animals and the oppression of people, the narrative's addition of the hyena as an extension of the French cook or Western imperialism places the various individuals and aspects of humanity as representative of base instinct rather than reduced to "bestial" bodies as Pi attempts to cope with the trauma of his experience. Instead, this portrays such hierarchical and cruel power dynamics as inherently inhumane, as such practices strip all parties of their humanity. This continues in the tradition wherein the historian "Jack Forbes argues that Western civilization fosters cannibalism as an embodied, psychosocial condition or psychosis rooted in exploitation and consumption" (King 3). In other words, the West gains power through the devouring of colonized cultures' and regions' resources, enacting a method of murder by guzzling livelihoods and lives. In the novel, this is represented by the French cook's brutal murder of Pi's mother, beheading her before throwing her body overboard with his mouth covered in red, only to let Pi kill him, realizing "he had gone too far, even by his bestial standards" (Martel 310). This vicious death parallels the colonialist powers' inhumane treatment of Pi's home of Pondicherry, and "*mother*land," India. A parallel that is furthered by the Taiwanese sailor's violent death, reflecting this cannibalism through the French cook's "consumption" of his flesh and the "exploitation" of his body by stripping it into bait before and after his demise (King 3; Martel 305-308). Since he is only referred to as the Taiwanese sailor, he becomes largely defined by his national identity to that country, which has struggled historically to gain sovereignty and international recognition as an independent country. Consequently, the zebra and the Taiwanese sailor become representations of the constant vulnerability that once colonized regions, like Pi's India and beyond, bear against all forms of imperialist violence. Just as the French cook's excessive craving leads him to eat flies on the first day at sea (Martel 303-304), his insatiable appetite reflects Western powers' continuous hunger,

which seeks new ways to consume violence through its perpetuation. Therefore, Martel portrays the French cook and colonialist powers' callous hunger as physical and social, spiritually starving Pi through the consumption of his mother and culture, the foundations of his early self.

However, Pi's connection to Richard Parker transforms his notions of hunger and consumption. Although Richard Parker is a multidimensional symbol and projection throughout the text, Pi's relationship with Parker galvanizes him to reclaim the agency required to survive the traumatic events of his isolation and embrace a hybrid identity against hegemonic Western ideals. The lifeboat Richard Parker and Pi occupy introduces the concept of a Bhabian third space. That is, as Bhaba explains, "a space 'in-between the designations of identity' and that 'this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy'" (qtd. in King 1). While Bhaba asserts hybridity to be cultural, Pi's journey focuses on spiritual transcendence, exploring the space between where sacred practices of the soul have become convoluted by the hegemonic notions of civilization and cultural domination. Thus, the ocean replaces the colonialist influence of society, becoming the psychological predator of Pi's mental-emotional reconciliation when distanced from the topographically rendered constraints of his former life and the one to come. On the lifeboat, Pi must tame Parker's animalistic violence and learn to contend with emotions and extremes previously limited by a hierarchical society for him to survive. At the same time, as a Bengal tiger, Richard Parker becomes both a connection to the India Pi leaves, and the vessel imbued with the contradictory traits critical to his survival: the violent dominance of colonialism and the violence required to survive imperialist oppression. Parker is at once the animal other, capable of killing, and the most instinctual aspect of humanity, as a being driven by the survival of spirit and body. In other words, he becomes a symbol of hybridity.

After considering the second story Pi gives authorities, Parker's status as a projection of Pi's survivalism posits that for Pi to accept a personally developed sense of multireligious faith, he must simultaneously embrace and tame Parker for all he represents. While Pi slowly realizes he can control Richard Parker through food, the two learn to depend on one another for survival. Through this pact, Pi endures but also embraces a projection of himself (Martel Ch. 48-57). This position is furthered in chapter 91, when, while temporarily blind, Pi is confronted by a blind Frenchman who attempts to attack and cannibalize him before Richard Parker kills this Frenchman (Martel). As a projection of Pi, this act demonstrates Pi's embrace of his survival instincts. Thus, this is a reclamation of his hunger to survive, which is driven physically for a tiger but spiritually for Pi. When Pi uses "[the Frenchman's] flesh as bait" and "driven by the extremity of [his hunger, he eats]... some of his flesh" (Martel 256), he symbolically establishes a new covenant with colonial powers, wherein "he must use faith, love, and sublimation to 'reverse-transubstantiate' [cannibalism] into interfaith communion" (Thorn 2). Moreover, through this reversal of metaphor and flesh, he gains the agency to exist in a multi-spiritual and seemingly dualistic identity, as emblemized by his united relationship with Richard Parker. On Martel's part, this is a moment akin to poetic justice, as cannibalism has been a significant device of great debate to express power and dehumanization in the Western literary canon, particularly during the height of colonization (Go 455). As cannibalism was a frequent way to sensationalize and distance colonizing parties as the superior binary, critical thinkers, such as Montaigne, began to challenge the irony of such comments, stating: "We may then call these people [Indigenous to Brazil who engaged in religious anthropophagy] barbarous, in respect to the rules of reason: but not in respect to ourselves, who in all sorts of barbarity exceed them" (para. 16). Hence, within the international annals, Martel establishes Pi's cannibalization as a reclamation of his narrative

and a repossession of power within the greater colonialist corpus which perpetuated its superiority and Pi's subjugation through the same medium of his subsequent claim to independence: storytelling.

Therefore, Pi cements his hybrid spiritual identity before entering the hegemonic Western sphere by reclaiming his spiritual and physical hunger by embracing a unique and personal interpretation of religious faith. Pi satiates his bodily and emotional hunger for moral clarity regarding deeply traumatic events by anthropomorphizing the individuals stranded on the lifeboat with him in his original narrative. Pi's creation of two stories allows for the formation of personal truth and the unburdening of trauma gained through storytelling's reconciliation of complex and violent realities. However, by telling both the authorities and the interviewer two versions, Pi facilitates his own therapeutic catharsis while creating an ambiguity that forces each party to decide the "truth." This embrace of ambiguity signifies Pi's reclaiming of his narrative and reluctance to force what Bhaba calls a "fixed identification" (qtd. in King 1) on truth, reality, or faith. In the film adaptation, when Pi delivers this second account, the camera slowly pans toward his face rather than cutting to a recreation of said events (Lee). Ang Lee's decision not to visually depict the "more believable" narrative reinforces the power Pi recovers in his original tale, solidifying its authenticity as the only image given to viewers. Lee decided to omit some of the more visually disturbing moments of survivalism in the novel, such as Pi's frequent killing of turtles and fish, eating Richard Parker's excrement (Martel 214), and most notably, the Frenchman's attack (Martel Ch. 91). As a result, rather than reclaiming power through Richard Parker's claws, wherein hybridity's strength kills colonialist trauma's domination, Pi's healing is conveyed through the optical unification of disparate realities and faiths. Instead, Lee was purposeful when depicting the grand corporeal struggle Pi survived, bringing to life the

"unbelievable" quality of his original story with the physicality of visual media. That said, Lee's decision to cut the scene where Pi's imam, priest, and pandit argue over his religious loyalty (Martel 64-69) is replaced with a young love interest. While this scene satirizes the religious expectations that restrain Pi in the book, the film's shift to young love diverts the viewpoint toward human bonds and love itself. Thus, reorienting the audience's focus around Pi's displacement from the struggles of religious devotion to an almost romantic passion for faith. Within the film, the striking effects bring to life both the beauty, notable in the bioluminescent waves in chapter 60, and the immense terror, seen in the large storm of chapter 83, which Pi experienced throughout his ordeal (Martel). The audience watches Pi's sense of love shift from young and innocent to rooted in an epic view of the oscillating affections of the world, changing the initial direction of Pi's journey from the novel, but reinforcing his greatness of spirit as centered in faithfulness to humanity and theology. This is ultimately underscored by the movie's closing scene, which shows Richard Parker disappearing into the jungle landscape (Lee), as Pi no longer must rely on this manifestation of his past identity to survive. Instead, Richard Parker has become irrevocably incorporated into his valuation of faith and life, as necessities uniform to physical hunger. In both the novel and film, he is left with the universality of his spiritualism and the assurance of his chosen identity amidst the turbulent waves of his new home's hegemonic ideals.

Pi's narrative repositions hunger from the dominating influence of the West to a recentering of agency for Pi to embrace his hybrid identity concerning heritage and spiritualism. While the film makes slight alterations, it emphasizes the use of visuals to balance violence and beauty, underscoring the spiritual purpose of Pi's narrative. Just as his name suggests, Pi transforms his identity from Piscine, a name that carries the weight of colonial objectification as

the French word for pool, to the claiming of Pi; that is, the acceptance of an infinite, oceanic universe buoyed by a belief in the spiritual synergy of existence beyond the finite barriers of hegemony.

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