Jake Haas

Mrs. Scherer

ENG4U

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Life of Pi - Marxist Criticism

What would you do if you just watched your entire family drown in the middle of the great Atlantic ocean, and saw a 500-pound Bengal tiger struggling to keep its head above the water? Would you invite it onto your 30-foot liferaft with open arms? Would you graciously throw it a life preserver? Would you survive with a 500-pound Bengal tiger, a hyena, an orangutan, and a crippled zebra on your lifeboat? Would you cry when the 300-pound tiger jumped from your raft after many months of serving and fearing it? Why do we feel, in society, that we must uphold the powerful, and give to those who do not give back to us? In the novel *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, a boy named Piscine Molitor Patel is stranded in the Atlantic ocean after his family’s cargo ship sinks mysteriously. He commandeers a life raft and decides to throw a life ring to Richard Parker, a 500-pound adult Bengal tiger, and let him on board. He had already “collected” a crippled zebra, and hyena, and would later find an orangutan. He must then survive for over 200 days in the ocean, finding food and water for himself and Richard Parker, who would kill and eat him otherwise. The novel *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel is a depiction of how in an unhealthy relationship between the powerful and the weak, the powerful depend on the weak only out of necessity, and the weak do not depend on the powerful.

In the book *Life of Pi,* there is a moment in time when Pi is deliberating about how to deal with Richard Parker, the tiger that has more power than Pi, and Pi is forced to serve him, proving that in a bad relationship between the weak and the powerful, the weak do not depend on the powerful, but the powerful depend on the weak only out of necessity. When faced with fighting, poisoning, or starving Richard Parker, Pi decides he must keep him fed and survive with him on board, otherwise he would be killed. Through this decision, Pi is showing that even when faced against the powerful and dangerous Richard Parker, it is still necessary for the tiger to depend on him in order to stay alive. After a few weeks onboard the life raft Pi finds food and water, and he must now decide what to do about Richard Parker, Pi is aware that he cannot fight him, and decides that he will wait for him to die of starvation, or dehydration, but after further deliberation he realizes that if Richard Parker became hungry that Pi himself would be eaten, leaving the tiger to die at sea. When he realizes this he tells himself that “He will swim as far as he has to, to catch the drifting raft and the food upon it” (Martel 160). He decides that their fates are connected and that in order to live “It was not a question of him or me, but of him *and* me” (164). This is often how the weak are connected to the powerful; the powerful depend on the weak, forcing their cooperation, and the weak serve the powerful living in fear of what would happen to them otherwise. An example of this can be found in dictatorship governments, where the ruler controls the country through military force and collects taxes without giving back to the people. The ruler relies on the money given by the people, but although the citizens get nothing in return they continue to pay due to fear of what would happen to them if they did not pay. In conclusion, at the moment when Pi decides to keep Richard Parker alive, Yann Martel is exemplifying that in an unhealthy relationship between the weak and the powerful, the powerful depend on the weak, and the weak do not depend on the powerful.

Yann Martel shows that the powerful depend on the weak out of necessity, but the weak do not depend on the powerful in an unhealthy relationship between the two when Pi catches a large fish and instead of eating it himself, he gives it to Richard Parker. After spending weeks in the Pacific ocean on a small life raft Pi and Richard Parker are both starving, Pi finds a small fishing kit in the emergency cargo section of the raft, and after trying for hours Pi finally manages to catch a very large fish called a dorado. Without a second thought he “...dropped the dorado into the boat. It landed with a heavy thud and provoked a gruff expression of surprise from Richard Parker. After a sniff or two, I heard the wet mashing sound of a mouth at work.” (186) The fact that Pi decided it was necessary to hunt for food and give it to Richard Parker - who could easily kill and eat him - proves that even though Richard Parker is undeniably very powerful, he still relies on Pi, who is a scrawny Indian boy. At this point in the novel Pi is starving, and if he were on the raft alone he would have eaten and benefited from the dorado himself, Pi is not reliant on Richard Parker because all that he gets in return from Richard Parker is not being murdered and eaten by him. In conclusion, when Pi hunts and feeds Richard Parker he is proving that in an unhealthy relationship the powerful depend on the weak, but the weak do not depend on the powerful.

When Pi reaches land after more than 200 days at sea Richard Parker runs into the jungle without looking back once, Pi is left crying because had believed that Richard Parker had grown to care about him after being served for almost a year, but he didn’t, displaying that the powerful rely on the weak only out of necessity. During PI’s experience he had been feeding, and giving water to Richard Parker in greater quantities than he himself ate, or drank. Richard Parker was unable to get much food for himself and could only drink what little water was left in the raft after a rainfall, so he depended on Pi for food. It took Pi 227 days to reach land, and during that time both Pi and Richard Parker were on the brink of starvation, what little food Pi managed to find he was forced to give most of it to Richard Parker in order to keep him from starvation. When Pi scraped onto a beach in Mexico, Richard Parker leaped from the boat and ran into the jungle, Pi “...was weeping because Richard Parker had left me so unceremoniously” (285) This quote signifies the disconnect between the weak and the powerful, Pi had become attached to Richard Parker because he had been serving him for so long, but Richard Parker did not care for Pi because he only relied on Pi as a necessity, and at any given time he would have killed him if it were to his benefit.

In conclusion, in the book Life of Pi, Yann Martel displays that in a bad relationship between the weak and the powerful, the powerful depend on the weak out of necessity, but the weak do not depend on the powerful. This can be connected to many social groups in the real world, such as a dictatorship, where the citizens are forced to serve the dictator. The difference between a good and a bad relationship between the weak, and the powerful, is that in a positive relationship between the weak and powerful, the powerful give back to the weak in ways that they could not for themselves, and that both parties rely on each other for purposes that they could only fulfill individually. For example, a government relies on taxes from its citizens, but in return, it enables the building of roads and public services, such as electricity and water, it also provides military protection, and enforces peoples rights and the law. It is important to understand these kinds of relationships to recognize when a relationship must exist between the weak and the powerful, and if the relationship is beneficial for both parties, or just one.

**Works Cited**

Martel, Yann. Life of Pi. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2001.