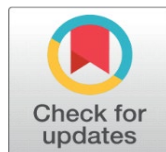


IDENTITY AND INFINITY: ALTERNATE MODES OF SCRIBING THE SELF: A COMPARISON OF MARIO VARGAS LLOSA'S AUNT JULIA AND THE SCRIPTWRITER AND YANN MARTEL'S LIFE OF PI

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ABSTRACT

An active engagement with the notion of the 'self' in modes of confrontation, contestation and conjuration has been an important tropological concern of fictional narratives, especially of an autobiographical intent and tone. Any coherent and significant concept of the 'self' entails a conglomeration of conscious and subconscious indices of subjectivities, intellectual sensibility, emotional drives and epistemological orientations, all of which are ideally conducive to artistic or material creativity. And, in life as well as in literature, it inevitably determines the ways and the extent to which the individual is capable of transcending the 'personal' to connect with the 'other' in varying degrees of empathetic identification. Literature is a terrain where one can encounter, on the one hand, protagonists who cross the confines of their self and feel one with the whole cosmos, and on the other, those who fail miserably in transcending the anxieties and fears of the personal, and recede into self-imposed reticence and insularity. The former is usually seen undertaking a self-chosen or imposed journey in which their inner psychic resources are unearthed and are ultimately traced to the vast eternity of cosmic energies. The latter is representative of the tragic consequences of the ruthless encroachment of normative social forces upon the personal space and the resultant subjugation of the individual self. There is also an in-between category of individuals who can strike a fine balance between their self and the social mores, through an ironic process of competitive negotiation. They consolidate their selves through the calibrated transgressions they perform upon the rules and rigours of social institutions and ethics, only to be re-inducted after a brief interregnum of ostracized animation.

Keywords: Self, Other, Identity, Prescriptivism, Essentialism, Existentialism, Metafiction

1. INTRODUCTION

The philosophical and psychoanalytical foundations of the conceptualization of the 'self' have had divergent orientations in the West and the East. The quest for the self in oriental cultures is found to be a journey that involves a progressive weakening of the Ego and the renunciation of all the material trappings of identity. The pre-Christian Romances of the West such as Beowulf, the Arthurian Legends, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight also evince a concept of formulating the Self in isolation from the social framework. The protagonists in these tales seek to know themselves by identifying with the infinity through emancipation from the spatial, temporal and epistemological constraints of their social existence. With the advent of Enlightenment modernity, and later of Freudian Psychoanalysis, a distinct methodology of constituting the individual into a normal, rational and socially oriented selfhood was ushered in. Freud's division of the psyche into Ego, Superego and the Id presupposes a balance between the three, based on a relative strengthening of the one at the cost of the other, to put individuals into categories of normality and abnormality. This involves an instructional process of ousting the genuine instincts and native tropisms of the human self and imposing

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upon it a set of alien norms and values that curtail the former. All narratives, in so far as they are expressions of the 'self' do conform to either of these alternate modes of realization.

Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001) and Mario Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977) could be perceived to constitute the two alternate, mutually exclusive formats of narrating the Self. Martel's protagonist, Pi Patel, is seen to extricate himself from his familiar surroundings and to launch himself into a cosmic canvass to define his identity about a universe which is an essential continuum of his inner self. After the shipwreck Pi comes into more intimate communication with the human and the non-human, the organic and the inorganic and the material and the spiritual, in his quest for physical as well as mental survival. Llosa's semi-autobiographical narrative presents the protagonist as one who is on a self-assumed mission to define his individual and artistic consciousness in a mode of conformative and contestational engagement with the established society. In an attempt to reinforce his self-perception and self-expression, the narrator of the novel attaches himself to an elderly Aunt in romantic love and a seasoned but tremendously prejudiced scriptwriter in creative writing. However, on both these fronts, what he desperately seeks is social confirmation. The narrator of the novel finally emerges as a successful writer who can present a unified perspective of the world, in marked contrast to the eventual mental dissolution of his artistic mentor. A comparative analysis of the two narratives yields valid insights into these antithetical modes of scribing the self in life as well as in fiction.

Mario Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* begins with a sentence that subtly captures the conflict between the existentialist angst of the adolescent protagonist and the typically essentialist ambience he inhabits. The expository statement, "I was very young and I lived with my grandparents in a villa with white walls in the Call Ocharan in Miraflores" (Aunt Julia 1) carries traces of his discontent with the uneventful circumstance of his life. His individual sensibility, characteristic of a "very young boy of eighteen years", longs for a more vigorous and colourful existence, but his life has been circumscribed by the essence of conventional wisdom that is inherent in the company of the grandparents. The boredom that the narrator feels over his situatedness in this overarching social sensibility is symbolised by the "white walls" of the house, devoid of the colours of vivacity and novelty. His life is characterised even otherwise by aspects of prescriptivism: he is, against his wish, a student of law at the University of San Marcos, a course which may lead him to a profession that is a jealous guardian of tradition and social essence. His part-time employment as the News Director of a Radio channel also precludes any scope for creativity as it merely involves a cut-and-paste exercise on the day's newspapers. His impatience with the routine results in a curious kind of absenteeism, indicative of a self that is in a cauldron, a mind that restlessly moves from one locale to the other. He is only an occasional visitor to the University, he spends as little time as possible at his work desk, and finds himself frequenting one or the other of the numerous cafes in the town, or paying regular visits to the Recording Studio of Radio Central which is the artistically creative counterpart of the news channel. He is seized of the amusing, albeit nauseating, disjunction between appearance and reality that is ordinarily inherent in almost every aspect of life, including the soap-operas that are aired by the Radio channel. To cap it all, both in the family and among his employers and colleagues he has to carry the burden of being perceived as "an intellectual" for his literary leanings, without ever proving himself as a successful writer.

The young narrator is evidently passing through a crucial phase of his individual evolution, every passing moment of which he turns increasingly aware of his nihilistic state of existence. He strives for a metamorphosis of the self which involves both the intellectual and the emotional planes of his life, and for both, he has to confront and engage the 'other' that has been remaining dormant within his psyche. His initial efforts to steer his artistic self into a greater level of realization result in the composition of bizarre short stories that touch upon fantasy, socio-realism, humour and even science fiction. But these are quickly consigned to the waste-bin as they are unequivocally termed incredible and unfeasible by his bosom friend and confidant, Javier. The character of Javier can be perceived as the alter ego of Vargas Llosa himself as it enacts a reality check on the exorbitant aspirations of the narrator for literary success. Javier in fact personifies the fears and apprehensions with respect to the responses and reactions of the essentialist audience or readers, which inheres the egotistic self of the aspiring artist. This perception is reinforced by the information that Javier has abandoned a course in Literature to turn to Economics which, according to him was far more preferable to the prescriptive essence of the literary works he was reading. Ironically, a simultaneous glimpse into the underlying conformist leanings of the narrator's self is available in his attitude to Pascual, his assistant at the news channel. Llosa always refers to Pascual's idiosyncratic detours in the preparation of the text for broadcast with a tone of corrective mockery that proceeds from a socially oriented professional disposition. At this juncture Llosa also admits that his consciousness is accommodative of faith in, or rather fear of, God or Providence, a key ingredient of essentialist

sensibility: "I was thoroughly convinced that a slip of my pen or a mistake in spelling was never a mere happenstance but rather a reminder, a warning (from my subconscious, God or some other being) that the sentence simply wouldn't do at all and had to be rewritten." (Aunt Julia 45) The inevitable, though calibrated progress of the self towards a more self-reliant sensibility is recorded when Llosa later narrates the experience of meeting a man, an acquaintance of Javier, who claimed to have the ability to contact departed souls: "I infuriated Javier by telling him that it was all his fault that the beyond had lost its poetry and mystery for me . . ." (Aunt Julia 58). These seemingly passing and insignificant remarks are actually determining moments in the early phase of the narrator's quest for a unified self.

It is at this critical juncture that the two key figures – Pedro Camacho, the scriptwriter, and Aunt Julia the elderly divorcee make their entry into the narrative which is evidently charting the evolution of the self of the adolescent boy into a mature individual and a successful writer. They constitute an externalization of the artistic and sexual drives within the psyche of the narrator that need be radically played out rather than proscriptively suppressed if his self is to emerge as a unified entity. That these two aspects – the latent essentialism in his artistic leanings, and his latent oedipal affinity for a maternal figure – are obstacles of equal significance to be confronted and conquered, in order to reinforce his ego and consolidate the individual self, is conveyed succinctly in the narrative: "I remember very well the day he (Genaro Jr., the owner of the Radio channel) spoke to me of this genius of the airwaves because that very day, at lunchtime I saw Aunt Julia for the first time" (Aunt Julia 5).

Pedro Camacho's success as a prolific scriptwriter of wildly popular Radio serials, captures the attention of the as yet unsuccessful artistic self of Llosa, because Camacho is an exteriorization of a part of his own self, preoccupied with the desire for success and recognition. The scripts written by Camacho typically embody the perceptions, prejudices, values and fidelities that are intellectually and emotionally confirmative of the essentialist concept of humanism. His stories are invariably centered upon a male figure that fits the essentialist descriptions of wisdom, ethical thought and compassionate disposition. Only the nominal spatial, temporal and professional indices of the protagonists differ, otherwise they are all the same. Script after script, the protagonists – whether it be Dr. Alberto de Quinteros or Sergeant Lituma or the Magistrate, Don Pedro Barreda y Saldivar or Don Federico Tellez Unzategue, the Rodent Exterminator – are all highly respected men in their fifties who invariably have "broad forehead, aquiline nose, penetrating gaze, the very soul of rectitude and goodness" (Aunt Julia 17, 63, 110, 148). They represent the humanistic constant that connects certain attributes of physical and mental wellbeing in direct proportion to social acceptability. All these details gain significance when they are contrastively juxtaposed with the narrator's irritability over being called a minor, and his anxiety regarding success in life.

The stories of Camacho are centered upon the moral dilemma faced by the protagonists in a challenging situation that demands the exercise of their will and wisdom, but are typically left short of a point of proactive culmination. The characters are never shown as surmounting their habitual essence and reaching an existential turn. It is worthwhile to note that the early stories of Llosa are spurned by Javier exactly because they are unusual in their endings. The inference is that it is too early for Llosa to leave the world of essences: before launching himself into an existentialist literary sojourn, he has to grapple with the world of essences more deeply and comprehensively through the medium of Camacho's scripts. Even more curious is the paraphernalia employed by the scriptwriter which includes a book titled *Ten Thousand Literary Quotations Drawn from Hundred Best Writers in the World*, carrying quotes from writers like Cervantes, Shakespeare, Moliere etc. on God, love, Death, Life Suffering and so on (Aunt Julia 53). He is in the habit of wearing masks and make-up that helps him enter the psyche of his characters while composing the scripts. He also imposes an arbitrary classification on his characters by correlating dissimilar criteria as ethical status and domicile. Coming into contact and greater familiarity with these scripts as well as the methodology and contrivances that are employed in their composition, is a way of confronting and critically engaging similar leanings in the narrator's own artistic self that has been founded upon received sensibility and essentialist prejudices.

The metafictional thrust in the work, which traces the processes of Camacho's literary creativity, proceeds from a methodology of comparison and contrast that is inherent in the psyche of the author himself. The budding writer in the eighteen-year-old Llosa applies the element of fantasy on the anecdotes narrated to him by the others, and the resultant stories end up as shreds of paper in the waste bin. A similar path is followed by Camacho who declaims, "I want to know whether that world there is or is not as I have represented it" (Aunt Julia 50). In Camacho's scheme, from A to Z every letter of the alphabet represents an attribute of human essence which is to be superimposed on the vagaries and accidents of life in the real world. An artistic self that is inclined to impose an arbitrary homogeneity and rationality on life is what the early Llosa and Pedro Camacho represent. But as Llosa advances in life and experience, Camacho's grip

over him is progressively loosened. He realizes the essential flaw in the scripwriter's artistic disposition, "I noted that the things that interested him most had to do with extremes: millionaires or beggars, blacks and whites saints and criminals" (Aunt Julia 51). And in an unguarded moment he states it succinctly, though unintentionally, to Camacho, or rather to himself: "You're like Romantic writers', I unfortunately remarked" (Aunt Julia 51). He also gets exposed to the dangers inherent in following a blindly prejudiced path of essentialist extremities in literary creativity. He had to share the blows showered on Camacho by two Argentines whose national pride had been injured by the serials (Aunt Julia 222). Thereafter it is a free fall for Camacho: an already failing memory reaches a point of irreversible disintegration. It plays havoc with his once-enviable grip over the details of his scripts, and they get all mixed up. As Camacho is finally moved to a mental asylum, Llosa becomes entangled deeper and deeper in the second aspect of his self-defining concern – his affinity for Aunt Julia. Years Later, when Llosa, now an established writer, sees Camacho, he is a mere shadow of his previous self, and the erstwhile scriptwriter has only an amusement value. He has served his self-annihilative part in the maturation of the artistic consciousness of the narrator.

Sexuality is an essential component of the 'self', in the Western definition of identity. The early phase of Vargas's interaction with Aunt Julia is engendered when he feels challenged by the elderly woman's perception of him as a child or rather a minor boy. As an adolescent male brought up in an essentially patriarchal environment, he finds sexuality to be the most convenient armour that he can wield to defend himself from her taunts, and he successfully uses it to throw her off her guard: "When Uncle Lucho and Aunt Olga were out of sight amid the crowd of couples on the dance floor, I held her tighter and snuggled up cheek to cheek with her. 'Listen Marito,' I heard her murmur disconcertedly, but I interrupted her by whispering in her ear: 'I forbid you to call me Marito ever again – I'm not a little kid anymore.'" (Aunt Julia 61). At this stage of his self-development, sexuality is consciously viewed as an instrument of conquest. However as the narrative progresses, subtle hints that the relationship is imbued with what can be termed as a subsumed oedipal desire, are made available. The intertextual connection of the name of the first film they watch together with D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* is the earliest indication to this effect: "And there we were, walking down the dark Quebrada de Armendariz, then along the wide Avenida Grau, heading for a film that, to top everything off, was Mexican and called *Mother and Mistress*" (Aunt Julia 11). However, it is also evident that the adolescent Vargas's erotic leanings for Aunt Julia is a psychic attribute that transcends the realm of carnality and involves a longing for a maternal figure who would empathetically confirm his own troubled selfhood:

We sat down and chatted for nearly two hours. I told her the whole story of my life – not my past life, but the one I was going to have in the future, when I lived in Paris and was a writer. . . . I realized at one point that I was speaking in the most heartfelt tones, and told her this was the very first time I'd ever confessed such intimate things not to a buddy but to a woman. "I seem like your mama to you, that's the reason you're confiding in me," Aunt Julia psychoanalysed. (Aunt Julia 93)

The proscribed relationship would die a natural death if the boy's self heeded to the essentialist strictures of social ethics. But the existentialist sensibility inherent in him tells him that he can constitute a unified selfhood not by bypassing the experience but by confronting and playing it out to its culmination. His willing defiance of society and the painstaking marriage to Aunt Julia are part of a self-determined process of maturation of the self. This aspect is highlighted in the description of the dance bar where their romance is detected by Uncle Jorge and Aunt Gaby: "Javier had chosen the Negro-Negro to end the evening because it had a certain intellectual-bohemian atmosphere . . . but besides that it was also the darkest boite in Lima . . . with a décor we thought was 'existentialist'" (Aunt Julia 215). More so than the space, the moment of the detection of the hither-to clandestine relationship, is also one that marks a decisive turn in the self of the narrator. As Llosa is advised by his well-wishers to desist from meeting Aunt Julia for a while to avoid further scandals, he tries to mingle with his former schoolmates, but he fails to strike a chord with them. As he discusses the problem with Javier, he is told, "It's because they're still just kids. But you and I are men now, Varguitas" (Aunt Julia 224-225).

The fact that Pedro Camacho and Aunt Julia had only an instrumental value in leading the narrator to a mature understanding and acceptance of the social norms, is conveyed in the final chapter of the novel. At peace with his parents and relatives, and with himself, he is evidently in possession of a self that is reconciled to his environment and his reintegration to the establishment is complete. Mario Vargas Llosa presents himself as a fairly successful writer, and divorced from Aunt Julia after an eight-year long marriage, he is now married to one of his young cousins. The headline of one of the front pages of the weekly, *Extra* – a scandal sheet – reads metaphorically: "Kills Mother So As To Marry Daughter" (Aunt Julia 400). And as Mario Vargas Llosa establishes himself in a fairly consolidated literary career, Pedro

Camacho, his disintegration complete and irreversible, willfully fades into the background. The narrative of Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter could be seen as charting the maturation of the self of an adolescent boy-cum-budding artist into maturity and unity.

Piscine Molitor Patel, the adolescent protagonist in *Life of Pi* is also seen to pass through transitions of personal identity. The evolution of the self from that of a young boy trained in the conventional modes of exclusivist thought, into an expansive sensibility that is all embrative, is charted in the novel in the typical Romance tradition where the hero extricates himself from his familiar environment to launch himself on a solitary quest for his true self. The gradual-though-dramatic metamorphosis of the character is facilitated by dislocating experiences and perilous circumstances that compulsively demand resourcefulness and deviation from normative sense. It is also to be highlighted that the dislocation in the life of Pi is significantly coincidental rather than accidental, as the intended transplantation of the family to Canada and the shipwreck that hurls him to isolation are merely catalysts that foment the transformations of the protagonist's self that is already in turmoil. Only a self that is capable of doubt has the potential for alterations.

The existential angst of Pi begins with his uneasiness with the most basic attribute of his identity – his name. He was named Piscine Molitor Patel, after a swimming pool of renown in Paris, due to his father's friendship with Francis Adirubasami, a swimming enthusiast. Once he enters the larger society his name is mocked at, and is given a ridiculous turn, by twisting it to pun with "pissing", a slang for 'urinating'. Even the teachers inadvertently slip into the easier-to-pronounce usage. Pi reminisces, "I spent my last year at St. Joseph's school feeling like the persecuted prophet Muhammed . . ." (*Life of Pi* 21). The boy's self is tormented on account of as superficial an index of personal identity as his name. But he exhibits, even at this early stage, an adaptational sensibility by which he deftly announces to the world the change of his name to Pi. As the teacher takes the attendance, Pi makes a decisive move which can indubitably be termed existentialist: "I got up from my desk and hurried to the black board. Before the teacher could say a word, I picked up a piece of chalk and said as I wrote: 'My name is Piscine Molitor Patel, Known to all as – I double underlined the first two letters of my given name – Pi Patel. For good measure I added $\pi = 3.14$ ' (*Life of Pi* 22-23). It is a significant moment in the course of the narrative as it marks the culmination of the first phase of his evolution where he comes to hold the conviction that identity, rather than passively received, is constructed through the exercise of the will.

The mathematical term Pi, is not to be comprehended within the limited framework of the first-person narrative of the boy as merely an abbreviation of the original name bestowed upon him by his parents. The nomenclatural alteration involves a prophecy on the possible expansion of the 'self' into a cosmic scale of infinity by liberating it from the narrow clutches of social identity. The change of the name from Piscine to Pi evokes the archetypal image of the Matsyavathara (incarnation as Fish) of Vishnu in the Bhagavatha Purana of Hinduism. Vishnu, in this incarnation, meant to salvage the Vedas from the demon Hayagriva, appears to the King Sathyavratha Manu as a small fish in the stream and requests him that it be transferred to a pond. Thereafter the fish grows steadily in size and stature, to be transferred to larger and larger water bodies, to reach the ocean (*Puranic Encyclopaedia* 94). The progressive transformation of the fish from one that is contained within the shallow confines of the pond to a being of cosmic scale is allegorical of the expansion of the self from individual consciousness to encompass the infinite. As the avuncular figure Francis Adirubasamy alias "Mamaji" remains rooted to his affinity for swimming pools all over Europe, the young boy flourishes out to make the infinity of the sea the canvas where he is to draw the outlines of his self. We find Pi comfortably afloat in a cosmic space, co-inhabiting the sea with creatures much unlike him.

The essentialist social structure, of which they are a part, tends to mould the identity of the young boys – Piscine and his elder brother Ravi, through a stern regime that engenders fear and obedience. The adult world always tries to inculcate lessons in the homogenized essence of behavioral patterns in the world, into the psyche of the children. When their father detects an undue affinity on the part of Pi for the wild creatures in the zoo, he tries to create fear rather than knowledge in the children regarding how dangerous animal behavior could be. It precludes the possibility of the children coming into an empirical knowledge of the world through direct experiential learning. Pi and his elder brother, Ravi are seen to punctuate their father's monologue regarding the ruthlessness of animal behavior with "Yes father" (*Life of Pi* 33).

The transcendental leanings innate to the self of Pi could be traced to a very early stage of his life. His perception of a disequilibrium between his self and his environment is evident in the overtures he makes to understand the natural and the spiritual worlds outside the purview of his routine life. Unlike Ravi, Pi evinces an interest in the 'other' – both in the spiritual/intellectual and biological/natural realms. He is able to cross the limits of the logical framework of his social education and to assimilate the secrets of animal behavior through acute observation and empathetic attitudes. He is

also able to evict his self from the comfortable couch of the Hindu faith and to attach himself to the other faiths of Christianity and Islam. Even as he becomes a cross-practitioner of all the three religions – Hinduism which he imbibed from his natural environment, Christianity which he comes to know through Father Martin, a Christian priest in Munnar (Life of Pi 54) and Islam which is introduced to him by Mr. Sathish Kumar, an enigmatically named Muslim baker, (Life of Pi 61) – he is able to reserve a poignant space in his self for Mr. Kumar, his Biology teacher who is a self-avowed atheist: “I felt a kinship with him. It was my first clue that atheists are my brothers and sisters of a different faith, and every word they speak speaks of faith (Life of Pi 28). Even before being hurled into the journey of uncertainty that is to ultimately mould his self, he is able to transcend the narrow specificities of faith and Knowledge and to attain his transcendental vision of God, though theoretical at this stage, through his acquaintance with the three “wise people” (Life of Pi 33) who represent for him demonstrations of the true purpose of God that is Love. But the common conception of God as a figure of power and punishment would not permit such a concept to flourish in society. Hence his eviction from established society is only a matter of time, and it coincides with the decision of Mr. Santosh Patel to relocate his family to Canada as he feels threatened by a similar regime of political power unleashed by the imposition of Internal Emergency by Smt. Indira Gandhi.

Pi begins his journey on a Japanese cargo ship ‘Tsimtsum’. Before they reach the shores, the ship is wrecked, and Pi finds himself marooned with a tiger, a zebra, a hyena and an orangutan on a life boat. One after the other he loses the vestiges of his previous self and is left alone with a tiger on the boat: “I was alone and orphaned, in the middle of the Pacific, hanging on to an oar, an adult tiger in front of me, sharks beneath me, a storm raging about me” (Life of Pi 114). The capsizing of the cargo ship is allegorical of the crumbling of traditions under the weight of the unsympathetic forces that categorize the present. The absolute contrast between the passivity and materialism of the cozy life on the shore and the precarious life on a raft on meagre resources and continual perils is what facilitates the transition of the self of the adolescent boy into a universal citizen.

Pi doesn't wish to conquer the other, he merely wants to co-exist. He expands his identity into one which includes concepts outside the previous societal mores. “It was not a question of him or me, but of him and me . . . We would live – or we would die – together” (Life of Pi 164). Every moment of his life in the infinity of the sea is marked by an existentialist struggle where the self has to be reoriented into contingent plans and devices. He begins to map a strategy that will delineate his portion of the lifeboat from the territory of Richard Parker. Leaving behind his human essence, he uses his bodily secretions like an animal to demarcate his area. In this way Pi continually constitutes and reconstitutes a self that is not inwardly reductive but expanding constantly to engage meaningfully with the whole of the universe. A transcendental growth of the self to the infinity of consciousness where nothing is alien and where nothing is to be excluded is what Pi arrives at. However, in this process of weakening the egotistic self and attaining emancipation from parochial attachments and selfish interest, Pi stops short of abandoning his emotional essence. He is still capable of connecting with the rest of the world through friendships, affinities and love; still capable of feeling agony over separation: as the Bengal tiger jumps off the lifeboat and vanishes into the jungle, he is heartbroken: “I wept like a child. It was not because I was overcome at having survived my ordeal, though I was . . . I was weeping because Richard Parker had left me so unceremoniously. . . . I hope you will remember me as a friend. I will never forget you, that is certain” (Life of Pi 285-286). An alternate ending is proffered towards the concluding part of the novel. Pi retells the entire story to make it more plausible to the Japanese officials who are questioning him regarding the information on how the ship sunk. He is thus capable of transcending the confines of his own perception to lay equal belief in all the diverse narratives centered upon the shipwreck and his survival.

Mario Vargas Llosa and Piscine Molitor Patel alias Pi Patel represent, in comparative and contrastive modes, the dislocating circumstances that engender a crisis of identity at a certain stage in the life of every individual, as well as the variable ways of viewing, handling and emerging from the crisis. Llosa, eighteen years of age, his parents far off abroad, placed in a materially comfortable social environment, and earning for artistic success, is weighed down in his self by a sense of failure and anonymity. Pi, sixteen years of age, separated for ever from his parents by a shipwreck, perilously clutching on to life on a lifeboat in the middle of the sea in the company of a ruthless Bengal Tiger, is striving for survival. Llosa's situatedness in a social environment determines the course of his quest for the self, which involves phases of emulation, opposition and invention. Pi's exile from humanity takes him to an alien environment where he has to unlearn and disown much of the epistemic foundations of his psyche and constitute an alternate self which is capable of alterity of perception, cohabitation with the other and contingency of action. In the final section of the two novels, we see two individuals proceeding in two directions: Llosa scribes his narratives on the basis of self-determination; Pi acknowledges

the possibility of diverse narratives based on the same experience. Llosa constitutes an identity for himself; Pi delimits his identity to embrace infinity.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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