

**Narrative Framing: Deconstructing Pi's  
Truth in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi***

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## Declaration

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in English Studies in the School of Arts, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College.

I, Anitha Pillay (8626584), declare that:

1. The research reported in this dissertation, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
2. This dissertation has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
3. This dissertation does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
4. This dissertation does not contain other persons' writing, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other researchers. Where other written sources have been quoted, then:
  - a. Their words have been re-written, but the general information attributed to them has been referenced.
  - b. Where their exact words have been used, then their writing has been placed inside quotation marks or indented quotations, and properly referenced.
5. This dissertation does not contain text, graphics or tables copied and pasted from the Internet, unless specifically acknowledged, and the source being detailed in the dissertation and in the References sections.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 3 December 2021

Anitha Pillay (8626584)

As the candidate's Supervisor I have approved this dissertation/ thesis for submission.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 3 December 2021

Dr. Jethro Kayat

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## Abstract

The primary focus of this dissertation is Pi Patel, Yann Martel's main protagonist in *Life of Pi* (2001). Martel's novel is framed by an Author's note that introduces a story that "will make you believe in God" (xii). This Author's Note encases a series of strategically nested embedded narratives. In the dissertation I explore Martel's use of narrative framing as a literary technique. It is proposed that this is an intentional narrative strategy that Martel employs to create nested frames to encase Pi's disparate accounts of his sea odyssey. The exploration on narrative framing as a literary technique will begin on the borders of the text, the *paratextual* framing. I rely on Genette's (1997) theories on *paratextual* framing in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* to analyze the circumtextual framing of *Life of Pi* (2001) and its correlation to Pi's 'truth'. The narrative frames in *Life of Pi* (2001) will then be analyzed within the context of Jacques Derrida's description of the performance of the frame in *The Truth in Painting* (1987). The potential performance of the frames in this context presents interpretive possibilities for analysing the representation of Pi's trauma in the novel.

I will also attempt to deconstruct Pi's 'truth' as represented in his divergent stories that are presented in the embedded narrative frames of the novel. The reader of the text, and the Japanese officials who interview him after the traumatic castaway episode of his life, are confronted with a choice of which story to believe as being the 'true' story. Viewed through a lens of subjectivity, each one of Pi's stories can be evaluated as containing its own truth. To this end, I will explore the relativity of truth and storytelling as interconnected themes in the novel. Martel presents storytelling as having its own truth, independent of any claim to objective reality and this is evident in Pi's appeal to the Japanese officials to choose the "better story" (Martel, 2001: 317). The nature of Pi's truth will be deconstructed in the exploration on trauma, and I rely here on developments in Trauma Theory, especially in relation to Literary Studies. The relationship between memory and storytelling in Martel's fictional universe is analyzed in relation to Pi's representation of his trauma in the novel. The dissertation also comments on the significance of religious narratives in Pi's physical and psychological survival. I conclude the dissertation with a critical examination of the privileging of one story as being the 'better story'. The aim of this examination is to discover how the possible performance of the narrative frames presents new avenues for interpreting Pi's trauma.

# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1. Introduction

So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you and you can't prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?' Mr. Okamoto: 'That's an interesting question...' Mr. Chiba: 'The story with animals.' Mr. Okamoto: 'Yes. The story with animals is the better story.' Pi Patel: 'Thank you. And so it goes with God. (Martel 2001: 317).

*Life of Pi*, written by Yann Martel, is a complex weaving of a fantastical story composed of multiple narrative levels. Martel uses the transformative power of storytelling to represent Pi Patel's story, and this is achieved through the use of a calculated narrative strategy. He frames the story with an Author's Note that encases a series of strategically nested embedded narratives. This narrative structure subverts any simplistic, binary conceptions of the division between 'truth' and fiction, creating a strong sense of verisimilitude and challenging the reader to trust the storyteller. Pi's appeal to the Japanese officials to choose the "better story" (Martel 2001: 317) rather than the one that is more 'believable', establishes storytelling as one of the novel's fundamental themes. The protagonist, Piscine Molitor Patel, the only survivor of the *Tsimtsum* which sank in the Pacific Ocean, relates two versions of his castaway story to the Japanese officials who were sent to interview him. They refuse to believe the first story as there are many aspects that appear impossible and contradictory. The Japanese officials (and by extension, the reader) must choose which of these seemingly incommensurate narratives represents a 'true' account of Pi's experiences. Viewed through a lens of subjectivity and bias, each one of Pi's stories can be evaluated as containing its own truth. This engages one of the major philosophical concerns of the novel: the nature of 'truth' in storytelling.

The narrative frames in *Life of Pi* are arranged as a series of nested frames. The novel is initially framed by Yann Martel, who is of course the author of the novel. This is followed by the Author's note (which contains tantalizing allusions to Martel himself) that functions as a frame narrative that envelops and embeds the subsequent series of narrative frames. Pi's first-person account of his survival as a castaway is technically one narrative frame.

However, Martel splits Pi's narration of his life story into two distinct sections: Part 1/ "Toronto and Pondicherry", and Part 2/ "The Pacific Ocean". These two sections will be analyzed as two disparate embedded frames that encapsulate Pi's narration and Martel's complex, destabilizing mode of literary representation. The interview transcript that follows "The Pacific Ocean" section of the novel marks the return of the fictional author's voice that is present in the Author's note. The interview transcript frame encloses the interview conducted by Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba, the two Japanese officials who were sent to investigate the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*. During the interview Pi presents two versions of his castaway experience to the Japanese officials as they do not believe that the first story is a credible representation of what truly transpired. The final frame, provided at the end of the novel in the form of an official report written by Mr. Okamoto, bookends the novel with the Japanese official's endorsement of Pi's animal story. The aim of this dissertation is to deconstruct Pi's 'truth' as presented in these multiple narrative frames depicted in the novel.

In attempting to deconstruct Pi's 'truth', this dissertation will explore the relativity of truth and storytelling as interconnected themes in the novel. In *Life of Pi*, the boundaries between truth and fiction are consistently transgressed and the reader is left constantly questioning what is credible and what is not. Martel presents storytelling as having its own inherent 'truth-value' that is independent of any claim to objective reality. The use of a fictional author (who very closely resembles Martel himself) to frame the story with an Author's Note at the beginning of the novel blurs the line between truth and fiction as it creates an illusion that this novel is a work of non-fiction. Janes (2013: 117) emphasizes this uncanny doubling effect when she refers to the fictional author as "a writer figure that exists as a kind of double for Martel himself". This marks the beginning of what becomes a constant questioning of the credibility of the narratives presented in this novel. Aligned to the suggestion that it is impossible to identify the objective truth in Pi's stories, this dissertation will critically examine the privileging of one story as being the "better story" (Martel, 2001: 317). The shifts in point of view, engendered by these overlapping narratives, are used deliberately to maintain verisimilitude in the novel. It is, therefore, impossible to point to a single, absolute 'truth' in the novel. In "How I wrote Life of Pi", Yann Martel (2015: 2) discusses the genesis of the novel, revealing that it was in Matheran, a hill station, that "whole portions of the novel emerged fully formed". In the Author's Note, there are references to the grant from the Canada Council for the Arts and Moacyr Scliar, the author of *Max and the Cats*, who Martel credits for providing "the spark of life" (Martel, 2001: xiv) for *Life of Pi*. These are facts

taken from Martel's life. This destabilization of the dichotomy between fiction and reality in the Author's Note is emblematic of Martel's belief in the transformative power of storytelling. What emerges is 'a better story', not one that is a dry and plodding description of the background research or writing challenges that he integrates into the fictional narrative.

This dissertation will also explore storytelling and religion as interconnected themes which contribute to the blurring of truth in *Life of Pi*. When Pi states, "[a]nd so it goes with God" (Martel, 2001: 317) at the conclusion of his account to the Japanese officials, he is declaring that stories and religious beliefs both require faith. Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, the three religions embraced by Pi, are presented as reservoirs of narrative and storytelling that encapsulate the belief structures of each faith. These seemingly incompatible narratives fascinate the young protagonist who maintains that while it cannot be proved that God exists, people like him believe that there is a God. When Pi states "...so it goes with God" (317), he is choosing "the better story" (317), a story which demonstrates his unshakeable faith in the existence of God. In the same way, since it cannot be factually determined which of his accounts is the truth, the "better story" must be accepted as the truth. Marginean (2017: 328), argues that Pi's belief in God "is a matter of better choice". This choice is viewed as an act devoid of support or repudiation of faith. The thrust of Marginean's argument is for truth to be viewed not from a perspective of logic, "but of faith, of understanding of experience, of individual evolution, and ultimately of choice" (328).

In deconstructing the nature of Pi's truth, it is imperative to examine how trauma affects Pi's memory and subsequent account of his castaway existence. The transformative experience of trauma could undermine the truth-value of the stories presented by Pi, both in the narrative frames and in his interview with the Japanese officials. The impact of trauma and its mediating influence on Martel's literary architecture of narrative frames will be explored by incorporating Derrida's (1987) theoretical perspective on the role and performance of the frame in art. I will critically examine Derrida's description of the frame's function in *The Truth in Painting* (1987), proposing that this formulation provides a useful analytical lens for understanding "the figurative representation of Pi's trauma" (Mill, 2013: ii) in Martel's novel. Martel's use of framing devices evokes an ambiguity that is sustained throughout the novel, from the fictional Author's Note that frames the novel to the final frame that encloses Mr. Okamoto's report in the final chapter. This report slips into the realm of non-fiction, thus supporting the veracity of the illusionary world created by Pi. This ambiguity problematizes a

definitive representation of Pi's trauma as Martel obfuscates the borders between truth and fiction. This elaborate narrative framing can be construed as "a performance in itself that demonstrates at once the impossibility of unequivocally representing Pi's traumatic tale, whilst providing a cathartic, if oblique, glimpse of it" (Mill, 2013: 45). Similarly, Duyfhuizen's (1992) examination of the interpretation and authority of narratives suggests that a merging of the frame narrative and the framed tale presents myriad avenues of interpretation. This bending and repositioning of the frames presents possibilities for the operation of multi-level analysis in attempting to deconstruct Pi's 'truth' as conveyed through the traumatic events that beset him from the moment the *Tsimtsum* sinks, and he becomes a castaway.

Altick and Fenstermaker (1993) emphasize the opportunity for exploration and discovery of the unknown in literary research. This theoretical lens is congruent with the overarching intention of this dissertation to examine how the possible performance of the narrative frames presents new avenues for interpreting Pi's trauma. It is envisaged that this exploration will reveal the possibility that the adult Pi, a skilful storyteller, is subtly pointing to what transpired in the 'real' as opposed to the imaginary world that he constructs by representing his trauma as an account that appears to be allegorical.

## 1.2. Synopsis of Novel

*Life of Pi*, published in September 2001, catapulted Yann Martel from relative obscurity to world-wide acclaim when he won the Man Booker prize in October 2002 (Martel, Reynolds, Wakelin, & Wicomb, 2015: xiv). In Paul Laity's (2016) article in *The Guardian*, Martel reveals that his book had sold approximately 13 million copies as of 2016, had been chosen as a set text in schools, and had been translated into more than 40 languages. Martel's skilful portrayal of Pi's castaway story inspired director, Ang Lee, to adapt this book into a film. This film won three Oscars at the Academy Awards, including best director. Martel, however, is critical of Lee's film. He classifies it as "visually ravishing" and "a good complement to the book", but describes the storytelling as being "a little bit weak" (Laity, 2016: 5). Martel's critique of the film's narrative deficiencies explicitly reveals his belief in the centrality of storytelling.

The novel is set against the turbulent political backdrop prevailing in India in the 1970s. Indira Gandhi's takeover of the Tamil Nadu government and the suspension of the Constitution of India for eight months compels Santosh Patel to leave India to secure a better future for his family (Martel et al, 2015). He decides to move his family to Canada to avoid a possible takeover of his zoo by President Gandhi and to escape the widespread economic difficulties characterising this unstable period of Indian history. They set sail aboard a Japanese cargo ship called the *Tsimtsum*, along with the crew and cages containing some of the animals from their zoo that they are transporting to Canada. Tragically, the ship sinks after an onboard explosion, and, according to Pi's fantastical narrative, he is the only human survivor of this tragedy, marooned on a lifeboat with a zebra, a hyena, Orange Juice the orangutan and Richard Parker, a young Bengal Tiger. Pi recounts how the hyena kills and eats the zebra first, as it was already injured and incapable of defending itself. In response to this violent act, Orange Juice attempts to physically intimidate the hyena. This attempt unfortunately fails and she is viciously attacked and killed, thus becoming the hyena's second victim. At that point Pi sees Richard Parker through the slats of the cross bench upon which he has taken refuge. The tiger emerges from his haunt on the lifeboat days later and proceeds to attack and kill the hyena. Marooned on a lifeboat somewhere on the Pacific Ocean, Pi then faces unimaginable perils for 227 days, with a vicious Bengal tiger as his only companion. When Pi eventually washes up in Tomatlán, Mexico, Richard Parker disappears into the forest without even a backward glance at him.

During an interview with two Japanese officials investigating the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*, Pi relates two versions of his castaway tale. The reader and the officials are confronted with a choice between two narratives that are starkly different in content, provoking a philosophical debate about faith and the relative nature of truth. The second story is more gruesome than the first. The reader is confronted with a teenager's loss of innocence and the extreme trauma that he must have experienced if this version is indeed a 'true' account of his journey. In the second account, the French cook, the human counterpoint to the hyena, kills and eats the Taiwanese sailor, represented by the zebra in the first story. Pi's mother, the maternal Orange Juice in the first version, is attacked and killed by the cook when she verbally castigates him for eating the drying chunks of the Taiwanese sailor's flesh. Pi, a vegetarian, descends to cannibalism when he kills and eats the flesh of the cook. If the Japanese officials and readers accept this account of Pi's story, then the bleak reality is that Richard Parker is a possible psychological construct facilitating Pi's emotional survival of these transgressive horrors experienced at sea. To accept this tale as the truth, is to accept that Pi had to descend to unimaginable depths of depravity, resorting to cannibalism to survive.

### 1.3. Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is composed of four chapters and a conclusion. Chapter One provides a general background to this dissertation and a synopsis of the primary text, *Life of Pi*. It also includes a comprehensive outline of the theoretical concepts that inform this research and an overview of critical scholarship on *Life of Pi*.

Chapter Two, “Narrative Frames: From the Threshold”, explores narrative framing as a literary technique and argues that it is a technique that Martel deliberately uses as a writing style. This examination will encompass both the paratextual framing and the nested frame structure of the novel. Beginning with the paratextual framing of the novel, the narrative frames in *Life of Pi* will then be analyzed in the context of Jacques Derrida’s (1987) description of the performance of the frame in *The Truth in Painting*. This dissertation hypothesizes that his exploration of the performative function of the frame will establish a correlation between Pi’s construction of his versions of ‘truth’ and the embedded frames in the novel. It is proposed that this is an intentional narrative strategy employed to create nested frames to encase Pi’s divergent narrations of his sea odyssey.

Chapter Three, “Gods and Stories: The Better Story”, examines key themes of storytelling, religion, faith, and belief in *Life of Pi*. These themes are encountered at the beginning of the novel and resonate throughout the narrative frames, culminating in Chapter 100 of the novel where the reader’s faith and belief are directly interrogated in the challenge to choose the ‘better story’. This chapter of the dissertation also explores religions as narratives, and comments on the significance of religious narratives in Pi’s physical and psychological survival. Pi, raised in a traditional Hindu family, develops into a boy who becomes a devout Hindu. However, in a development that confounds both his family and his religious instructors, Pi decides to also embrace both Christianity and Islam. What no one comprehends is Pi’s fascination with the tales and fables that illustrate the beliefs of each faith. This chapter of the dissertation also outlines the narrative dimension of Pi’s integrated religious beliefs and argues for the transcendence of storytelling in a traumatic universe.

Chapter Four: “Tigers and Trauma: Reading Pi’s conflicting narratives as a response to trauma”, examines the nature of trauma in Pi’s disparate narratives and its impact on Pi’s

sense of self. The relationship between memory and storytelling in Martel's fictional universe is analyzed in relation to Pi's representation of his trauma. This chapter also focuses on deconstructing Pi's 'truth' as presented in the embedded frames of the novel. Deconstruction Theory, a method of critique developed by Jacques Derrida, is the theoretical framework that will inform the interpretation and analysis of Pi's 'truth'. This chapter will focus on identifying the ambiguities and complexities inherent in the novel. These ambiguities that arise in the novel leaves the reader with the task of attempting to unravel which of the two versions of Pi's tale represents a 'true' account of his castaway experience. A deconstruction of Pi's 'truth' entails an exploration of trauma as an affective factor that contributes to the construction 'truth'.

The conclusion of this dissertation presents the possibility that a hermeneutic reading and interpretation *Life of Pi*, coupled with a deconstructive lens, enables the reader to glimpse the 'truth' in Pi's narration of his castaway tale.

## 1.4. Critical Scholarship on *Life of Pi*

In the last twenty years, Yann Martel has been the subject of many media articles and interviews. *Life of Pi*, his internationally acclaimed novel, has generated many reviews in various publications and has been featured in both academic and non-academic articles. Some of the critical interviews and reviews will feature in this dissertation's exploration of how Martel frames the novel and how this paratextual element contributes to deconstructing Pi's 'truth'. For example, Michiko Kakutani (2010), in an article in *The New York Times*, reveals that Martel uses the same frame narrative structure in *Life of Pi* that he employs in his book *Beatrice and Virgil* (2010). Examining the significant themes and literary techniques that characterize Martel's novel will also require an engagement with academic scholarship in the form of journal articles as well as masters and doctoral dissertations. This review of critical scholarship on *Life of Pi* is structured according to the overarching themes and major issues raised in the novel. The literature reviewed in the following paragraphs is not used exclusively in the discussion of a particular topic or chapter of the dissertation as these articles tend to investigate multiple ideas that intersect and overlap in the course of this dissertation. I will, however, structure this review in line with the focus of each chapter, beginning with Colleen Mill's (2013) *Frames, the Fantastic and Allegory: Narrating Trauma in Yann Martel's Life of Pi*, as Mill's (2013) dissertation sparked my initial fascination with narrative framing and deconstructing Pi's 'truth' in *Life of Pi*.

Mill (2013) uses Derrida's (1987) *The Truth in Painting* to demonstrate how narrative frames test the distinction between fact and story, engendering a profound sense of ambiguity within the text. Mill analyzes *Life of Pi*'s framed narrative in the context of Derrida's (1987) description of the performance of the frame, to propose that it is a performance that suggests possibilities for the figurative representation of Pi's trauma. It is not the intention of this dissertation to replicate Mill's (2013) research. However, it will be used to reinforce my hypothesis concerning the correlation between the representation of Pi's 'truth' in the embedded frames and the performance of the narrative frames in *Life of Pi*. Mill's (2013) proposition concerning the representation of Pi's traumatic experience within the narrative frames of the novel also provides an insight into the role that profound trauma plays in the construction of Pi's 'truth'.

Criscillia Benford (2010: 324), in “‘Listen to My Tale’: Multilevel Structure, Narrative Sense Making, and the Inassimilable in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*”, describes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), a novel that has three narrative frames, as having “a structure that is often likened to Russian nesting dolls”. Although this article does not feature any references to *Life of Pi*, Benford's (2010) clarification of terminology concerning narrative framing and multilevel novels provides invaluable insight into framing as a deliberate narrative strategy. In this novel, which also features a vast amount of travel and geographical diversity, the creature's narrative is embedded within Victor Frankenstein's account of his experiences. This account is related to Captain Robert Walton, who in turn is telling this story to his sister via a series of letters. The validity of these events cannot be trusted as the relationship to objective ‘truth’ is complicated by the different characters' divergent motivations and possible prejudices. Benford (2010: 324), provides a range of additional terminology accepted by literary critics when engaging with novels that are classified as “multilevel novels”. Some of the terms used include “inset tales, frame narratives, Chinese boxes, stories-within-stories, [and] narrative embedding” (324).

In “ ‘Yarn-Spinning is also Highly Recommended’: Yann Martel's Framing Narratives”, Scherzinger (2006) analyzes metaphorical framing in Yann Martel's short story collection *The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories* (1993). The writer asserts that what can be clearly discerned in this collection is “the construction of a metaphorical frame that creates and encircles the real, thereby describing two important post-structural frames of reference” (54). The post-structural frames, that Scherzinger (2006: 54) is referring to here, are the “Lacanian ‘magic circle’ ” and the “Derridean parergon”. Scherzinger (2006: 56) proposes that “Derrida's ‘parergon’ and Lacan's ‘magic circle’ work in strikingly similar ways, in that both destabilize reductive oppositions and in their cultural forms, perform a dynamic and creative function for the subject”. Scherzinger's (2006) discussion of Derrida's *parergon* is relevant to my hypothesis on the possible performative function of the narrative frames in *Life of Pi*. One of the major aims of my research is to use Derrida's (1987) theory on framing in *The Truth in Painting* to demonstrate how the nested frames in Martel's novel enclose and influence Pi's narration of his survival story. Scherzinger (2006: 54), also provides a compelling argument for the framing performance of Martel's stories to be viewed as “intriguingly complex, operating not only at the level of theme and subject but also at the level of structure, prepositional play, language and metaphor”.

Mill's (2013) proposition that the framed narratives in *Life of Pi* engenders a profound sense of ambiguity within the text is also explored in an article that she co-wrote with Karen Scherzinger. Scherzinger and Mill (2013), in "Allegory, the Fantastic and Trauma in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*", highlight two important points regarding the inherent tensions contained within the ambiguous double narrative that Pi recounts to Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba. Firstly, there is no perfect correlation between the two stories, and secondly, a discernible, interpretive gap exists between the two stories that Pi relates in the different narrative frames (62). This ambiguity that pervades the novel leaves the reader with the task of attempting to unravel which of the two versions is the true story. Scherzinger and Mill (2013: 54), however, contend that this ambiguity is "irresolvable", thus subverting any attempt to validate one version over the other. In this article the writers explore the complexities of interpreting the representation of Pi's trauma in the novel. Furthermore, Scherzinger and Mill (2013: 53) argue for the double narrative to be viewed as an "unorthodox implementation" of allegory. Martel's representation of Pi's trauma is examined in this article against this backdrop of viewing Pi's double narrative as an allegory. The article by Scherzinger and Mill (2013) presents distinct interpretive possibilities for analysing and deconstructing Pi's 'truth' in the two disparate accounts that he presents to the Japanese officials.

In "The Limits of the Story: Reading the Castaway Narrative in *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* and *Life of Pi*", Janes (2013) explores the tensions created between the frame narrative and the embedded narrative frames in *Life of Pi*. The critical focus of Janes' (2013) article on this premise contributes to the academic scholarship on narrative framing in the novel. Janes (2013: 110) also emphasizes how the novel explores and tests "the limits of the story by presenting fantastic narratives that trespass upon credulity, and that require – but do not always receive – a leap of narrative faith". In Chapter Three of this dissertation, I explore how Martel raises this issue in the novel, provoking the reader's reciprocal response to Pi's fantastical tale. Janes' (2013) article also engages comprehensively with some of the major issues explored in this dissertation in relation to *Life of Pi*: narrative framing, faith, belief, religion versus spirituality, the limits of storytelling, and trauma. The main aim of my dissertation is to deconstruct Pi's 'truth' by drawing a correlation between the employment of narrative framing as a narrative strategy and Pi's narration of his castaway tale. Janes (2013) explores the implementation of this narrative strategy in her article and suggests that the effect created by embedding texts within texts has a significant impact on the reader's interpretation. This article foregrounds the same tantalizing challenge faced by readers as

they attempt to negotiate meaning and attempt to determine the ‘truth’ of what really transpired during Pi’s sea odyssey.

“ ‘Hollow at the core’: Deconstructing Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*”, by Florence Stratton (2004) explores the novel’s challenge to accept the better story. Stratton (2004: 16) warns against undermining “the novel’s own deconstructive project”. Stratton’s (2004: 6) argument that the novel “is organized around a philosophical debate about the modern world’s privileging of reason over imagination, science over religion, materialism over idealism, fact over fiction or story” is relevant to this dissertation’s aim to deconstruct Pi’s ‘truth’. According to Stratton (2004: 7), to “deconstruct this reason/ imagination binary hierarchy is the project of Martel’s narrative”. The article contributes an extensive debate on Martel’s engagement of these dichotomies in *Life of Pi*. Stratton examines the ambiguous narratives that Pi presents to the Japanese officials during the interview and draws attention to the difficulties of finding a perfect correlation between the story with animals and the story with humans. The article also deals extensively with the theme of religion in the novel, a theme that I explore in some depth in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

Duncan (2008: 167), in “*Life of Pi* as Postmodern Survivor Narrative”, explores the novel as “a fictional articulation of a postmodern identity as it shapes and is shaped by a narrative of trauma”. Duncan’s examination of the novel as a survivor narrative and the discussion of Martel’s representation of trauma provide observations are salient to this dissertation’s study of storytelling and trauma. Duncan (2008: 173) comments on another important aspect of Pi’s representation of his trauma, “the dynamics of memory and strategies for shaping remembered events into a narrative”. Chapter Four of this dissertation will examine the influence of these two factors on Pi’s narration in the embedded narrative frames of the novel. Furthermore, Duncan’s article discusses how Pi repeatedly emphasizes religion as an important factor in his transcendence. The writer dismisses the sea odyssey as a period that “features very little religious or spiritual insight” (177). Duncan’s observations on the religious aspect of Pi’s survival are insightful and will be used to bolster arguments raised in Chapter Three of the dissertation on Pi’s spiritual and moral transcendence. In this chapter I present an opposing view to Duncan’s (2008: 177) assertion that the castaway period “features very little religious or spiritual insight”.

The science versus religion dichotomy and the novel's challenge that this story "will make you believe in God" (Martel, 2001: xii) is the focus of Stephens' (2010) "Feeding Tiger, Finding God: Science, Religion, and 'the Better Story' in *Life of Pi*". Stephens (2010) is concerned with the reception of this challenge by both religious and secular readers of the novel. The article examines the human/animal relationship in Pi's narration of his castaway tale, especially the relationship between the teenage Pi and Richard Parker. The Pi/Richard Parker relationship is mysterious on two levels: Pi's mastery over a vicious, carnivorous tiger and the teasing possibility that Richard Parker is a psychological construct of Pi's mind, a coping mechanism that allows the traumatized boy to endure the unendurable and obscure his complicity in vile and sinful transgressions. Stephens (2010) explores the relationship that Pi develops with Richard Parker within the context of castaway narratives, and comments on Martel's inversion of the power dynamic between humans and animals. The role of religious narratives in the survival story is the focus of a considerable portion of this article. The writer draws attention to the way Martel employs the science/religion dichotomy in representing his main protagonist's traumatic experience. Stephens (2010) also shares his views on factors like faith, belief, and doubt that contribute to the physical and psychological survival of Martel's main protagonist.

In "*Life of Pi: Perspectives on Truth*", Morse (2013) addresses one of *Life of Pi*'s most important themes: the nature of truth. She refutes Stratton's (2004) reason/imagination binary and argues for the novel to be analyzed through the lens of multiple perspectives. According to Morse (2013), truth is complex and viewing it through different perspectives opens the novel to further research on this topic. The nature of Pi's 'truth' is complex, and in this article, Morse (2013) outlines the complexity inherent in using one perspective to analyze and interpret what is considered the true account of Pi's survival. Morse (2013: 1) encapsulates this belief in her statement that "multiple perspectives provide a more comprehensive understanding of the truths embedded in a story". Morse (2013) presents an argument for the privileging of the reader's perspective, as Martel challenges the reader at the end of *Life of Pi* to choose which story to believe. To deconstruct Pi's 'truth' is therefore a challenging undertaking. However, Morse (2013) presents some insightful possibilities for the interpretation of his castaway tale.

Swanepoel (2020), in "Shrödinger's Tiger: Names, Stories, Belief and Truth in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*", investigates the significance of the names of characters in *Life of Pi*.

Swanepoel (2020: 1) describes her study as one that “links the names and (re)namings to the novel’s thematic concern with storytelling and the truth”. The investigation into this aspect of the novel highlights the “link between storytelling, truth and spirituality” (2). Emphasis is placed on Martel’s destabilization of the dichotomous relationship between reality and fiction through his interweaving of seemingly disparate (and even contradictory) narrative threads. One suggestion by Swanepoel (2020) is to view Richard Parker as a fictional construct that Pi creates as a survival strategy, enabling him to clearly delineate the innocent, teenage Pi who existed before the shipwreck from the tainted, cannibalistic Pi who comes after. The article’s relevance is also evident in Swanepoel’s (2020) exploration of spirituality in the novel, and how it alludes to Pi becoming a spiritually and morally transcendent being. In *Life of Pi*, Martel’s main protagonist’s life story is presented as one that demonstrates the human ability to rise above extreme suffering and trauma.

In “Tigers, Humans and *Animots*”, Cloete (2007) also pursues the possibility that Richard Parker is a metaphoric representation of the cannibal Pi. This article features an exploration of the self and other in relation to the possibility that Richard Parker is Pi in the animal version of Pi’s castaway tale. Cloete (2007) presents a systematic examination of how notions of self and other are depicted in *Life of Pi* and describes the animal as *trace*. The writer argues that “the truth of the original event is often forgotten or entirely sublimated” (329). This perspective lends credence to the proposition that Pi constructs a backstory that skilfully hides the truth of the traumatic events that he is subjected to as a castaway. Cloete (2007) suggests that the horrifying truth is not confronted as it would have precipitated Pi’s psychological destruction. This argument is substantiated in Cloete’s (2007) exploration of Martel’s extensive research that focused on castaway narratives. Cloete (2007) suggests that Pi fears discovery and imprisonment for cannibalism as he will have to confront his morally corrupted psyche.

## 1.5. Theoretical Framework

This dissertation focuses on three main areas of inquiry in relation to Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, namely narrative framing, deconstructing Pi's 'truth', and the affective impact of trauma on memory. The research method used in this dissertation is exclusively qualitative and will employ hermeneutics to analyze the primary text, *Life of Pi* (2001). Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey are credited as the founders of the German hermeneutic tradition (Goring, Hawthorn, and Mitchell, 2004). The concept of the 'hermeneutic circle', a procedure first described by Schleiermacher, was further developed by Dilthey in his construct of how we interpret texts. The 'hermeneutic circle' is a term that is "used to express a seeming paradox that the whole can be understood only through an understanding of its parts, while these same parts can be understood only through an understanding of the whole to which they belong" (Goring et al, 2004: 153-154). Dilthey asserts that it is possible to achieve "a valid interpretation by a mutually qualifying interplay between our evolving sense of the whole and our retrospective understanding of its component parts" (Abrams and Harpham, 2005: 135). This approach opens avenues for multifarious interpretations, as each reading will bring forth multiple meanings generated from the same text. Moules (2002), however, highlights how hermeneutics, in direct contrast to other methodologies, creates meaning rather than merely reporting on findings. Moules (2002: 32) emphasizes that this creation of meaning is not dependant on subjective interpretations but on interpretations imbued with "a sense of responsibility to deepen understanding". It is through this lens that I will critically analyze *Life of Pi*, using a hermeneutic approach to inquiry and interpretation. According to Neuman (2014: 103), hermeneutics is a method "that originates in religious and literary studies of textual material in which in-depth inquiry into text and relating its parts to the whole can reveal deeper meanings". A connection can be drawn here to *Life of Pi's* concern with faith and belief in God. Hermeneutics also "emphasizes conducting a close, detailed reading of the text to acquire a profound, deep understanding" (Neuman, 2014: 103). The rationale for adopting a hermeneutic approach in this dissertation is to reveal deeper meanings and hidden layers of interpretation embedded within the text. However, Neuman (2014: 103) also points out that this can result in subjective researcher bias being applied to the text. It is this subjectivity that may be the Achilles Heel of this dissertation. While I am aware of the potential pitfalls involved in using this approach, the interpretive value in exploring how Pi

represents his 'truth' in the embedded narrative frames is pivotal to deconstructing Pi's 'truth' in the novel.

The main aim of this dissertation is to explore how Martel uses frames as a literary construct to encase and represent Pi's 'truth'. This dissertation will also attempt to deconstruct the very nature of this 'truth' by exploring how trauma affects memory. Deconstruction theory and trauma theory are the two principal theories which this research project will draw on in an endeavour to ascertain whether it is possible to privilege one story over the other. The use of embedded narratives in the novel will also be analyzed to interrogate the concept of truth as a complex, ambiguous construction. Martel's use of this literary technique, with its stories within stories, is a textual embodiment of Pi's fragmented, traumatized self. The spaces created in the frames of each narrative are symbolic representations of the psychological and emotional distancing required by Pi to relate his two stories, divesting himself of the trauma he refuses to confront. The role and significance of narrative framing in *Life of Pi* (2001) will be analyzed, and to that end this dissertation will explore a comprehensive range of theories on the use of narrative framing as a literary technique.

## **Deconstruction Theory**

Deconstruction Theory, according to Rivkin and Ryan (2004: 257), is a method of critique developed by Jacques Derrida. This theory will be used as a theoretical foundation when exploring the ambivalent nature of Pi's seemingly conflicting narratives in *Life of Pi*. According to Derrida (Deutscher, 2005), deconstruction is something which is at work within a text. In response to Claude Lévesque's query concerning the origin of the word "deconstruction", Derrida (1988) states that when he used deconstruction as a word, he translated two words from Heidegger, *Destruktion* and *Abbau*. Derrida (1988: 86-87) explains that *Destruktion*, is "not a destruction but precisely a de-structuring that dismantles the structural layers in the system", while *Abbau*, which is similar in meaning to *Destruktion*, means "to take apart an edifice to see how it is constituted or deconstituted". In the excerpt from *How to read Derrida* (Deutscher, 2005: 6), Derrida reveals that each time he studies Plato, to be true to Plato, he has "to analyze the functioning and dis-functioning of his work". Deutscher (2005) clarifies the scope of deconstruction theory and focuses on how Derrida

presents deconstruction in one of his seminal texts, *Of Grammatology* ([1967]1976). In this text, Derrida introduces deconstruction “as a critical reading of texts which brings to light what is already at work” (Deutscher, 2005: 28). According to Deutscher (2005: 28), Derrida also “pays attention to ambivalent ideas within a text which are inconsistent with its overt statements”. In *Life of Pi*, Pi’s construction of a fantastical tale of his survival stands in stark contrast to the grim, bloody second version of his castaway tale. The shifts in point of view, conveyed through the different narrative voices in the novel, create a sense of verisimilitude that shifts the boundaries of believability. The construction of this second version points to the possibility that the adult Pi is choosing to narrate his trauma in the only safe mode that he knows: using storytelling as a medium of representation. This exemplifies Pi’s view of storytelling as a mechanism of survival. In attempting to deconstruct these complex constructs in the novel, deconstruction must be viewed as more than “mere commentary” as it reveals “suppressed textual conflicts concerning what is ideal, primary or original and what is degradation or insufficiency” (Deutscher, 2005: 28).

Bezuidenhout and Cronje (2014: 232) state that deconstruction, “as a method of analysing text, is the process through which the researcher takes the text apart to understand how meaning is constructed”. The writers also point out that the reader, in this analytic act, is “central in determining the meaning of a text” (232). In this predominant role, the reader of Martel’s novel is tasked with identifying the story that is more believable. Caution, however, must be exercised when using deconstruction as a method of analysis as it must not be viewed as license to destroy the text. In this dissertation the focus will be placed on identifying and critically analysing the ambiguities and complexities in the novel, *Life of Pi*. It is this researcher’s belief that the ambivalent nature of the two versions of Pi’s castaway tale, recounted within the different narrative frames, invites its own deconstruction. To this end, the aim is to expose the possibility that Pi’s ‘truth’, while fundamentally elusive, can be alluded to through a critical analysis of the textual conflicts inherent in the novel. The intention is to uncover that which is purposely suppressed and cunningly hidden in the interweaving of the novel’s different narrative frames. Pi’s trauma, narrated through the fantastical stories encased in these frames, resists confrontation or resolution throughout the novel.

David Nunan (2003: 10) points out that to develop one’s own philosophy on research, one must “determine how the notion of ‘truth’ relates to research”. Nunan (2003: 10) raises the

question of whether we can “ever prove anything”. In *Life of Pi* the reader is presented with several ‘truths’, and we are left in an ambivalent state at the end of the novel as to which ‘truth’ to accept as being true. Is it possible to unequivocally prove that one version is the truth while the other is an elaborate fabrication? Nietzsche (1873) (cited in Gilman, Blair, and Parent, 1989), offers an insightful definition of ‘truth’ when he explores the distinction between truth and lying. Nietzsche states that “[t]he liar uses valid terms, the words, to make the unreal appear real” (Gilman et al, 1989: 248). When he “misuses established conventions by arbitrary substitutions”, especially if done in a “selfish and damaging manner”, he will no longer be trusted and will be excluded from society (Gilman et al, 1989: 248). Nietzsche views truths as illusions “about which it has been forgotten that they are illusions” (Gilman et al, 1989: 250). Viewed from a Nietzschean perspective, one possibility that can be proposed for Pi’s presentation of two stories and his request for the acceptance of the ‘better story’ is his fear of being charged and found guilty of murder if they choose the story with humans. Pi, the officials, the fictional narrator and the reader will have to confront the truth of Pi having to descend to the depths of depravity by resorting to cannibalism to survive. From this admittedly grim and nihilistic standpoint, Pi’s refashioning of ‘the real’ is not necessarily intended to protect him from the psychological trauma of his experience, but rather the social trauma attendant upon being discovered guilty of committing criminal, socially taboo, acts.

## **Trauma Theory**

Literary criticism has progressively turned its attention to trauma theory in the past thirty to forty years (Rivkin and Ryan, 2004). Anne Hunsaker Hawkins (2007) traces the history of trauma theory, from British physician John Erichsen’s investigation into the trauma experienced by those who exhibit a fear of train accidents in 1886, to contemporary trauma theory, encompassing work by psychologists like Pierre Janet, Bessel van der Kolk, and Judith Herman. Hawkins (2007: 120) pays particular attention to van der Kolk’s expansion of Janet’s “theory of dissociation”. The theory proposed by van der Kolk (1996), discussing how traumatic memories are stored in the mind, emphasizes these memories as images or sensations that have “no linguistic components” (Hawkins, 2007: 287). These depictions resist verbalisation of the traumatic event. Hartman (1995: 537), drawing attention to the correlation between a person’s verbal communication and trauma, points to “the existence of

a *traumatic* kind” of knowledge that resists conscious retrieval and emphasizes that communication of this knowledge is tainted with distortion. This theory contributes to the possibility of ‘reading the wound’ “with the aid of literature” (Hartman, 1995: 537). According to van der Kolk (1996), when people become more conscious of memories, they are then able to construct narratives from the raw material of their traumatic experiences. In *Life of Pi*, Pi’s trauma is mediated through the stories that he relates, both in his account to the fictional author, and to the two Japanese officials. It is also told from the retrograde perspective of the adult Pi recounting his castaway tale to the author, thus undermining the truth value of his account. Hartman (1995: 547) cautions against believing fantastic tales related by the “I” that “claims authorial privilege” in “imaginative literature”. In this vaunted position the adult Pi who relates his castaway tale in the first-person, can be perceived as a powerful construct armed with authorial license that enables total control of the narrative that he spins as the main protagonist. In this way Martel emphasizes one of the major thematic aims of the novel: demonstrating how the power of storytelling can transform a traumatic universe.

Judith Greenburg (2007: 6), argues that “[a]ny act of telling the story of another involves translation, loss and interpretation.”. Greenburg (2007: 6) believes that “stories of trauma expand the layers of inaccessibility”. This “translation, loss and interpretation” (Greenburg, 2007: 6) is evident, for example, in the Author’s notes in *Life of Pi*. The fictional author is a construct that tests the boundaries of reliability, and his framing tale that encircles Pi’s account is imbued with subjective interpretations of Pi’s narrative. In Chapter 21 of the novel, after a conversation with Pi, he ruminates on his own life and considers it mundane in comparison to Pi’s traumatic experience. He writes down his impressions gleaned from their discussion and remarks on Pi’s “[w]ords of divine consciousness: moral exaltation, lasting feelings of elevation, elation, joy, a quickening of the moral sense” (Martel, 2001: 63). He interprets this as an encapsulation of Pi’s religious philosophy, one that elevates moral truth above intellectual truth, thus blurring, even further, the lines between truth and fiction in narrating Pi’s trauma. Zilber et al (2008: 1049) explore multiple contexts in the embedded narrative and suggest that narrators “create contexts when telling their stories, and interpreters create new possible contexts when making interpretations of narrator’s stories”. Although this article has been written from a psychological perspective, dealing with narrative accounts from research subjects and not a literary text like *Life of Pi*, their theory on

the creation of new possible contexts when interpreting stories can be applied to unravel Pi's representation of his traumatic experience as a castaway.

Gordon Pradl (1984: 3), in *Narratology: The Study of Story Structure*, proposes that it is through stories that people “construct and maintain their knowledge of the world”. In this article he draws attention to psychologist George Kelly's (1955) belief that personalities grow out of the stories people have chosen to construct from their perceptions of what has happened to them, and how it influences their future expectations. In Chapter 6 of *Life of Pi*, these propositions are clearly reflected in the narrator's poignant view of Pi's life as an adult, when providing a snapshot of his pantry stocked with canned food and packages, “to last the siege of Leningrad” (Martel, 2001: 25). Is this perhaps a psychological response to his fear of being confronted with another catastrophe that would plunge him to the abyss of desperation? Raoul, Canam, Henderson, and Paterson (2007), present valid arguments for new approaches in research on narrating disease, disability, and trauma. The writers include an exploration of how these stories are framed. Although this book focuses on stories narrated by research subjects, and explores how they frame these stories, it provides invaluable insight into narrative framing and the way trauma impacts memory and is translated into a narrative discourse of the self. Pi's articulation of his trauma can be explored against this backdrop of research detailing how trauma survivors narrate their stories. These stories provide a rich background of the strategies various survivors of trauma employ when narrating their trauma and how they live with the memories of these horrific and traumatizing events. Rauol et al (2007: 112) point out that trauma, like the unspeakable events experienced by Pi, disrupts “the body, the self, and the life-as-story”. This suggestion presents possibilities for the interpretation of Pi's rationale for presenting two versions of his survival story. Is it possible that he presents both stories and requires the listener to choose the ‘better’ story because it is the projection of a coping mechanism, an escape from the horror and depravity he had to confront when he reached the shores of Mexico?

## **Narrative Framing**

The key question of this dissertation focuses on the correlation between Pi Patel's narration of his life story and Yann Martel's use of narrative framing as a literary technique. Martel

uses a frame narrative structure in *Life of Pi* to embed stories within the frame narrative, a structure that can be compared to Russian nesting dolls or Chinese boxes. Chris Baldick (2008), in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, defines a frame narrative as a story in which another story is enclosed and embedded as a ‘tale within the tale’, or which contains several such tales. One of the foremost narrative theorists, William Nelles (1997), provides further elucidation on this topic. Nelles (1997: 1) draws attention to the various labels ascribed to this structural device: “ ‘frame’, ‘Chinese box’, ‘Russian doll’, ‘interpolated’, ‘nested’, ‘boxed’, or ‘embedded’ narrative”. In Chapter Two I will examine how Martel employs framing as a narrative strategy in the novel. The exploration will begin with paratextual framing as theorized by Gérard Genette (1997) in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Secondly, Jacques Derrida’s (1987) theory on the performance of the frame in *The Truth in Painting*, will be applied to the text to propose that the frame and embedded narrative frames of *Life of Pi* have the same performative functions as that ascribed to the framing of a work of art.

*Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* is Genette’s (1997) seminal work on *paratexts*, a word that he coined. In the Foreword to Genette’s (1997) book, Richard Macksey describes paratexts as “liminal devices and conventions, both within the book (*peritext*) and outside it (*epitext*),” (xviii) that form part of the frame that contains both the text and all the liminal devices “that mediate the relations between the text and reader” (xi). In Chapter 2 I will explore how these paratextual devices frame the novel from the fringe or threshold of the text in *Life of Pi*. Genette (1997: 2) describes this threshold as “a zone without any hard or fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world’s discourse about the text)”. It is envisaged that an exploration of the paratextual framing of the novel will contribute to deconstructing Pi’s ‘truth’ as presented by Martel in the novel. As Maclean (1991: 273) points out, one of the central questions raised by Genette’s (1997) book “is the relationship between a text and its frame”.

The framed narrative, within the context of Jacques Derrida’s (1987) description of the performance of the frame in *The Truth in Painting*, will be explored in *Life of Pi* to suggest that Pi constructs his versions of ‘truth’ in embedded frames that are in turn surrounded by the enveloping frame of the fictional author’s narrative. In this way, this dissertation will engage with critical research on the use of frame narratives in literary works. In his seminal text, *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida (1987) defines *parergon* as a structure that frames a piece

of art. He ascribes a performative function to this structure that is typically complex, theorising that the parergon is a complex framing that “has as its traditional determination not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy” (61). Nicolas Royle (2003: 15), in *Jacques Derrida*, describes the *parergon* as “the border or frame being both beside the work (para + ergon) and part of the work”, thus highlighting the complexity of this concept. In *Life of Pi* the Author’s Note functions as the *parergon*, the frame narrative that encases the *ergon*, the embedded narratives of the novel. The frame within a frame that surrounds a piece of art is the *passe-partout* of the structure (Derrida, 1987). According to Derrida (1987: 12) the *passe-partout* functions between the frame, “in what is properly speaking its internal edge, and the external edge of what it gives us to see”. The *passe-partout* is ascribed a performative function of allowing or making “the picture, the painting, the figure, the form, the system of strokes [traits] and of colors” appear “in its empty enclosure” (12). In the dissertation I will explore how Francis Adirubasamy’s narration of Pi’s extraordinary castaway experience functions as the *passe-partout* of the novel.

Drawing attention to the instability of frames in literature, Richardson, Phalen and Rabinowitz (2002: 330) argue that “they invite their own deconstruction”. They suggest that for texts that go “beyond the customary limits prescribed by realism”, “the frame is there to be jostled, bent, or broken altogether”. Their suggestion can be applied to *Life of Pi*, thus opening possibilities for interpreting how the narrative frames function in the novel as possible responses to multiple levels of trauma. Duyfhuizen (1992: 133), in *Narratives of Transmission*, states that “From the Homeric singers to Cervantes in his preface to *Don Quixote*, authors have framed their tales with claims of either authority or non-authority”. In *Life of Pi*, Martel exercises authorial authority by inserting himself into the novel as the fictitious author, irrevocably blurring the lines between fact and fiction.

This Introduction provides a broad overview of the novel *Life of Pi* (2001), the dissertation’s main research aims, an overview of critical scholarship on *Life of Pi*, and a theoretical framework outlining the major theories upon which this research will be constructed. I aim to debate the literary and philosophical issues embedded in *Life of Pi* and to show how these complex aesthetic and thematic considerations are communicated to the reader in Martel’s playful narrative structure. By engaging in these philosophical and literary debates, it is

envisaged that this dissertation will contribute to the growing landscape of literary research, specifically in the fields of modern literary theory, philosophy, and education. Months of research, which entailed a wide search of databases via the University of KwaZulu Natal library portal, the Independent Institute of Education library portal, Google, Google Scholar, Google Books, and networking with other academics, has revealed that there is no research, undertaken thus far, that explicitly replicates the main research aims of this dissertation. This dissertation will, however, integrate and engage with other critical theorists' work on narrative framing, deconstruction theory, trauma theory and *Life of Pi*.

## Chapter Two

### Narrative Frames: From the Threshold

One of the major aims of this dissertation is to establish a correlation between the narrative frames of the novel and Pi's narration of his castaway tale. I argue that Martel's use of this mode is significant on multiple levels as it underlines the novel's thematic concerns with trauma, memory, storytelling, and the relativity of truth. This investigation focuses on the overarching framing structure of this multilevel novel, beginning with the first framing by the author Martel. I propose that the framing of the novel must be analyzed from the paratextual threshold, moving systematically outward to the frame and embedded narratives to demonstrate how they influence Pi Patel's narration of his traumatic ocean voyage. The significance of the frame narrative and the embedded narrative frames of the novel will be analyzed in the context of Jacques Derrida's (1987) description of the performance of the frame in *The Truth in Painting*. I contend that Derrida's (1987) delineation of the frame's performative function in art is useful when analysing Martel's literary deployment of narrative framing to depict Pi's traumatic castaway experience.

*Life of Pi* is a multi-dimensional novel that is structured as a framed narrative. The novel opens with a frame story, the *Author's Note*, that serves the classical function of the Derridean *parergon* as elucidated in the theoretical framework section of this dissertation. Francis Adirubasamy's story "that will make you believe in God" (Martel, 2001: xii) is embedded in the *Author's Note*. This embedded frame performs the structural function of the *passe-partout* in Martel's complex embedding. The *Author's Note* technically frames the *ergon*: Pi Patel's remarkable survival story. However, the *ergon* (the work), in the context of Derrida's (1987) *The Truth in Painting*, includes Pi Patel's entire life story. This story is refracted through four embedded frames, so the *ergon* encompasses a holistic view of these embedded narratives. I argue that Pi's narration is split into two distinct nested frames: "Toronto and Pondicherry" and "The Pacific Ocean". Nested within Pi's second narrative frame is another embedded frame that encloses the interview transcript of the conversation between Pi and the Japanese officials. This frame creates a performative space for the representation of Pi's ambiguous double narrative. The last embedded frame - the final chapter of the novel - encloses a report of the interview that Mr. Okamoto sends to the fictional author. Martel's use of non-fictional artefacts in the novel's last two frames

underscores his proclivity for destabilizing simplistic binary oppositions such as fiction/non-fiction and truth/fiction in his metafictional literary project. Okamoto's report validates Pi's first story, and this is evident in Okamoto's acceptance of the story with animals as the "better story" (Martel, 2001: 317). In this chapter, I draw attention to the possibility that the use of the embedded frames to enclose Pi's stories provides a literary *sanctum sanctorum* for Pi's narration of his trauma, thus pointing to a correlation between Pi's construction of his versions of 'truth' and the embedded frames.

## **2.1. Paratextual Framing: On the Threshold of Discovery in *Life of Pi***

At the beginning of this chapter, I refer to the first framing of the novel by Martel as author of the novel, and it is in this liminal space that I will begin exploring the significance of framing in *Life of Pi*. Nelles' (1997: 9) exploration of framing in narratives provides some insight into how *all* narratives have an inherent, embedded dimension and contends that this embedding results in the narrative "existing at the centre of a series of real and fictional agents who present and receive it". The importance of understanding all these relations at work in a narrative is highlighted. Nelles (1997) draws a distinction between the 'historical author' and the 'writer' of a text. 'Historical author' is a term that signifies the multitude people involved in the production of the text (including the editor or any other person or entity mediating this process) while the term 'writer' refers solely to the author. Prince's (1987: 21) definition extends this term further by referring to an 'author' as a "maker or composer of a narrative". Martel's structural choices regarding the framing of the novel can be analyzed from the perspective of Martin's (2017) work on the setting of the parameters of a novel. Martin (2017: 19) believes that this parameter originates "with the writer's first step onto the page". The framing of the story thus begins with the first sentence that the author writes and progresses to an eventual end, the final sentence that marks the closing frame of the text.

Genette (1997), in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, explores "the relationship between a text and its frame" (Maclean, 1991: 273) and how it connects text and context. Genette (1997) presents a comprehensive perspective of paratexts and how they form part of the intricate relationship between the author, book, and reader. All the liminal devices and conventions associated with a book form part of that book's history and "ensure[s] the text's

presence in the world” (Genette, 1997: 1). Two elements that Genette (1997) examines in his book will be explored in relation to *Life of Pi*: “the public epitext” (344) and the title of the novel as a “peritext” (5). I aim to show how the novel is initially framed and how the very act of framing the novel invites its own deconstruction.

A “public epitext” (Genette, 1997: 344) includes “all public performances perhaps preserved on recordings or in printed collections: interviews and conversations assembled by the author”. Martel’s literary work, having achieved international fame and the coveted 2002 Man Booker Prize, places the writer in the public sphere where Martel is actively involved in discursive engagement with the novel and its interpretation. In “How I Wrote Life of Pi” (2015), an auto-review that Martel wrote for *Medium* in their July 2015 issue, Martel reveals that it was John Updike’s review of Moacyr Scliar’s *Max and the Cats* (1981) in the *New York Times* that influenced him to write *Life of Pi*. On Martel’s return to Canada the search for Moacyr Scliar’s novel is largely unsuccessful, and the author maintains that a copy of the text has never been obtained. Approximately five years later, in Matheran, Bombay, Martel remembered Scliar’s novel and *Life of Pi* immediately began to take shape in his mind. Martel also reveals the vast volume of research that was undertaken during these formative creative stages including visits to zoos, interviewing a zookeeper, visits to temples, churches and mosques and reading the foundational religious texts of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Included in this article is a reference to the extensive research conducted on the survivors of shipwrecks, animal behaviour and psychology. This expansive research informs Martel’s framing of the novel as a castaway tale. According to Genette (1997: 352), the auto-review is an “autonomous public epitext”, positioning it within the full authority and control of the author. This perspective of Martel’s auto-review raises the question of whether the public is being ‘bamboozled’ or if this is Martel’s ‘truth’, exposing the “dry, yeastless factuality” (Martel, 2001: 63) of how he framed the novel. While providing an intimate view of the rich and varied creative process that characterizes *Life of Pi*’s genesis, the autonomous nature of this type of review cannot be ignored as it calls into question the reliability of the constructed author of the *Author’s Note*. This paratextual border can, therefore, be viewed as a site of initiation that activates the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy between Martel’s historical account of how he wrote the novel and the fictional author’s background that is revealed in the *Author’s Note* of the novel.

In various media *epitexts*, Martel (2015) consistently recounts the same background information that is revealed in “How I Wrote Life of Pi”. Emma Robertson (2016), in an interview with Yann Martel, boldly questions Martel’s reliability as a narrator. While Martel is the author of the text and not the narrator (fictional or implied) the question validly interrogates one of the major concerns raised in *Life of Pi*: the reliability of the fictional author. Martel’s response to this enquiry veers away from the topic of reliability and focuses instead on authorial intention. According to Martel the freedom to subjectively, or objectively, interpret a text (rather than a text’s ‘reliability’) is of paramount importance. He reveals that Pi’s presentation of two stories is a deliberate construction as he wants readers to have the agency to choose their own preferred interpretation. Robertson (2016: 1) broaches one of the major themes of the novel, the relativity of truth, by questioning whether Martel believes that “truth is open to interpretation”. Martel’s response provides a glimpse of his philosophical views on ‘truth’, and on a surface level, it appears that his views have substantially influenced the framing of this novel. He maintains that people generally focus on “factual truth” (1) instead of questioning what can be done with these facts, and draws attention to diverse representations of truth, like art, that “fits into the realm of a greater truth” (1). He highlights the importance of stories as he believes that every life contains a story and proposes that if the preoccupation with factual truth is suspended, life will have a “richer interpretation” (1). Martel’s belief in the truth-value of storytelling is explicitly conveyed from the paratextual borders of *Life of Pi* to the last page of the novel and its insistence on the need to accept the “better story” (Martel, 2001: 317).

In a *BBC News* forum (BBC, 2002), Martel asserts that this novel is not an allegory or fable. Authorial intention is demonstrated through Martel’s suggestion that prospective readers refrain from applying a reductive allegorical lens to the novel and should instead read it as a presentation of two distinct stories. The author concedes that if one story is accepted as being the true story, then the other story can be viewed as allegory. The story with animals appears to have certain allegorical qualities. However, the story that foregrounds degraded humanity evinces a savage verisimilitude that does not obscure its primal vision of cannibalism and horror with any overt allegorical allusions. While Martel provides clarity on his intention to include two stories, writers like Scherzinger and Mill (2013) anchor their theories on the novel’s allegorical characteristics. The writers argue that the novel, as an allegory, presents deconstructive possibilities for interpreting Pi’s trauma. In the article, Scherzinger and Mill (2013: 64) draw attention to the novel being viewed as allegorical by “almost every reviewer

who has commented on it” and assert that any reading of the novel should acknowledge this as a pivotal mode of transmission. This view is supported by Marais (2018) who suggests that an allegorical juxtaposition of the human and animal stories establishes Pi as the tiger and signifies his moral degradation. Although paratextual elements like interviews or the title of a novel are “always subordinate to ‘its’ text” (Genette, 1997: 12), we cannot ignore the messages conveyed through these modes. From these thresholds or borders we can infer who the author is, the authorial intention, or (as in the case of the auto-review) an interpretation of the text provided by the author.

I will now turn my attention to the paratextual qualities of the novel’s title. The title, as “a direct authorial speech act” (Maclean, 1991: 275) mediates between reader and text and provides a threshold through which the reader can enter the text. *Life of Pi* is a title that evokes a specific period of Piscine (Pi) Molitor Patel’s life. The title *Life of Pi* prepares the reader for how they will approach it with its biographical intimation: suggesting that this novel will recount the story of Pi’s life. Derrida’s (1981) analysis of titles elucidates precisely how titles frame a text. Derrida (1981: 8) draws attention to the placement of the title “on the border of a work... found on the outer border of what it entitles”. The title of Martel’s novel, positioned on the outer border of the narrative, initiates an ambiguity that can only be resolved if one is to accept that this narrative is a work of fiction and not a biography or autobiography as inferred by the title. According to Genette (1997: 88) titles that contain a reference to “Life of” are ambiguous and designate both “the object of a discourse and the discourse itself”. In *Life of Pi*, the title designates both the discourse - the narration of Pi’s castaway tale - and the object of the discourse – Pi himself. The ambiguity engendered in the title invites its own deconstruction as the word ‘*Life*’ infers a biography of someone’s life. However, *Life of Pi* is universally classified as a work of pure invention.

The main protagonist’s name, Pi, can be viewed as a type of homonym. Stratton (2004: 7) proposes that Pi’s birth name has a “homonymic resemblance to ‘pissing’ ”. Significantly, pi is an irrational number that cannot be fully represented as it contains infinite decimal points, and it is this irreducible infinitude that Martel evokes with the title, *Life of Pi*. In an interview with Jennie Renton (2005), Martel reveals that he chose ‘pi’ because of its mysterious quality and because, like life, it is not finite. He did not title the novel “*The Life of Pi*” as the definite article, ‘the’, would have signified “a single life” (Renton, 2005:1). By omitting the definite article, Martel maintains the infinite value of pi and uses its connotations of irrationality and

boundlessness to convey the myriad possibilities of interpreting Pi's protean survival narrative. *Life of Pi* is a title that initiates a debate on whether this novel is indeed a total work of fiction, a factual account told to Martel as author, or an artful mix of fact and fiction. This dilemma is irresolvable as the narrative structure of the text itself shifts and bends in ways that emphasize the fiction/ non-fiction, real/imaginary dichotomies at work in the novel. As a title, *Life of Pi*, reflects the irrationality of Pi's journey and survival, and nebulously hints at a biographical narrative forged in reality rather than the imaginative realm of fiction. The binary opposition of fact/fiction that is explicitly conveyed through the title will influence the intended audience's interpretation of the text. This dichotomy, conveyed through the wording of the title, *Life of Pi*, is sustained from this fringe to the first page of the novel, the *Author's Note* that marks the frame narrative of the story.

Genette's (1997: 2) view of paratexts as a "threshold" or "fringe" situates both the title and the *epitexts* discussed thus far on the threshold or fringe of *Life of Pi*. The hermeneutic stance adopted at this point of the dissertation is to view the paratextual framings as "creating a 'bridge'" (Wolf, 2006: 30) between the inside and outside of the text. In this hermeneutic analysis of *Life of Pi*, both the title (*peritext*), and the public *epitexts* (like the auto-review and media *epitexts*) are presented as the edge or "fringe" (Genette, 1997: 2) that frame the novel. Ian Reid (1992: 44), in his exploration of framing, uses Derrida's aphorism to emphasize that these "circumtextual framing[s]" cannot be viewed as an indestructible, solid frame as its reception is wholly dependent on the reader's interpretation. He invokes Derrida's suggestion that: "Framing occurs, but there is no frame" (Derrida, 1978: 83, cited in Reid, 1992: 45). Berlatsky (2009: 166) on the other hand, breaks down Genette's division of the term "paratexts" by drawing attention to where they are "physically located". *Peritexts* are assigned the role of functioning as "liminal features on or within the cover of the book" (166) and can therefore be viewed as a physical border. However, in *Life of Pi*, *paratextual* framings are situated on the outer edge of the *parergon* of the novel. An initial engagement with the text is undertaken from this point of entry that delineates the outside from the inside, a site of ambiguity positioned "between text and context", belonging "to the 'work' but not to the text proper" (Wolf, 2006: 20).

## 2.2. The Frame Narrative of *Life of Pi*: The Derridean *Parergon*, *Passe-Partout*, and Framing Horizons

This dissertation has explored how paratextual framings influence the reading, analysis, and interpretation of the novel. I will now examine the significance of the frame narrative and investigate the performative function of the frame using Derrida's (1987) theory on the framing of art in *The Truth in Painting*. Derrida's ideas are primarily formulated in relation to paintings and statues, but his theory can also be meaningfully applied to the analysis of literary art. This is revealed in the description of Kant's (1790) *Critique of Judgement*, a book on the history of aesthetics, "as a work of art" (Derrida, 1987: 49). Heller-Andrist (2011) contributes to the theory of framing with her proposition that framing, as a structure, can be applied to other categories that are viewed as art. The writer (2011: 16) argues that if writing reveals structures that are synonymous with art, then Derrida's theory on frames can be applied to literature. In this section of Chapter Two, Derrida's (1987) conception of the *parergon* is employed to unravel the significance of *Life of Pi*'s framing narrative. Francis Adirubasamy's narrative is examined in the context of Derrida's theory that the *passe-partout* functions between the frame "in what is properly speaking its internal edge, and the external edge of what it gives us to see" (Derrida, 1987: 12). I argue that Martel's use of the frame narrative as a narrative strategy initiates a fiction/non-fiction dichotomy in the *Author's Note* of the novel and introduces some of the novel's major themes. It also frames the embedded narratives and challenges the reader to suspend disbelief and choose "the better story" (Martel, 2001: 317).

Derrida (1987: 9) describes the *parergon* as a frame or boundary that is "neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work (*hors d'oeuvre*), neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below". The *parergon* does not merely surround the work, but "disconcerts any opposition", "does not remain indeterminate and gives rise to the work" (Derrida 1987: 9). Prentice (2020: 234) explains this simply when she states that the frame encloses and defines the work by the working of "its inner borders", while simultaneously defining "what is external to it by the work of its outer borders". These workings of the frame indicate the active communication between the *parergon* (frame), the *hors d'oeuvre* (outside the work) and the *ergon* (work), rendering the *parergon* "an intermediary between *ergon* and surrounds" (Heller-Andrist, 2011: 12). Martel structures *Life of Pi* in the style of a framed narrative that uses a fictional

*Author's Note* (*parergon*) to frame the main protagonist's story, thus embedding Pi's tale (*ergon*). As a framing device, the frame narrative of *Life of Pi* "shapes the entire text from the start" (Wolf, 2006: 183). Mill's (2013) research on the *parergon* describes the frame as a "supporting framework" (Wolf, 2006: 119). She proposes that if Derrida's theory on the *parergon* is applied to literature, then the frame narrative of a novel is not only the medium through which the story is conveyed, but also denotes how it frames and interacts with the embedded narrative.

The first page of the novel begins with a title, "*Author's Note*" that creates the illusion that this is a work of non-fiction. An author's note is generally regarded as a non-fiction supplement to novel, so the reader's initial response to an author's note is to believe the account rendered by the author of the note. As an intertitle, the *Author's Note* unsettles the genre status of *Life of Pi* as its tone and content are strongly reminiscent of non-fiction genres (like biographies and autobiographies) while still embedded in a novel that is widely classified as fiction. Martel sustains this illusion with the creation of an author-narrator who bears a startling resemblance to Martel. This establishes a destabilizing ambiguity that interrogates the boundary between his reality and the fictional fabula of the novel. While the fictitious author does not address the intended or implied reader as Yann Martel, the content of the Note contains substantial allusions to Martel's life and journey as a writer. At the same time, we cannot assume that the novel is a mimetic representation of Martel's life, as to do so implies that he is hiding behind a literary mask. What can be proposed is to view the fictive author as a fictional construct that Martel imbues with biographical details drawn from his own life. This information in the *Author's Note* is integral to the process that shaped the novel and informs the novel with an autobiographical quality that is impossible to overlook. Abrams (In Abrams and Harpham, 2005: 23) explains that "the distinction between autobiography and fiction has become more and more blurred". This precarious distinction is evident in novels where the author "mingle[s] fiction and personal experience" (23). The first line of the *Author's Note*, "This book was born as I was hungry" (Martel, 2001: ix), introduces a fictional author as the narrator of the *Author's Note*. Janes (2013) describes this narrator as an author-narrator who appears to be Martel's doppelgänger.

From the first page of the *Author's Note*, Martel's doppelgänger author-narrator establishes the significance of storytelling in the novel. The fictional author's proclamation that "[t]his book was born as I was hungry" (Martel, 2001:ix), is a metaphor suggesting the pains of

creation, thus alluding to one of the major themes of this novel: storytelling. Bal's (1997: 54) emphasis on "narration as an act of creation" aligns with the fictitious writer's creation metaphor. In this opening line Martel establishes some of the novel's major concerns including the creative power of storytelling and the recurring theme of hunger. According to Janes (2013: 117) this hunger reflects the fictive author's inability to produce any noteworthy piece of literature and this "appetite" is defined in "spiritual rather than material terms". Morse's (2013) perspective on this theme is analogous with Janes' (2013) proposition. However, Morse expands on this theme by highlighting how hunger is a lingering presence in the novel. Morse (2013: 16) proposes that it is through the publication of the novel, *Life of Pi*, that both author-narrator and Martel appease their desire for "literary recognition, stillness, and a Story with emotional life". Martel's aesthetic hunger is comparable with the physical hunger that Pi is confronted with as a castaway (16). The author-narrator's "[l]et me explain" (Martel, 2001: ix) launches a story that at face value appears plausible and alludes to its veracity. However, it also gives rise to the questionable trustworthiness of the written word. What lingers is a tangible sense of "bamboozlement" (x). In the *Author's Note* the fictional author reveals that the only preparation for his first trip to India entailed a familiarization with the meaning of one word: "bamboozle" (ix).

Martel's engagement with the elusive nature of truth is evident in his emphasis of the word "bamboozle" (Martel, 2001: ix) and its meaning in the Indian context. After revealing that he "used the word on occasion" (ix), the author-narrator states "and truth be told, it served me well" (ix). This marks the first encounter that we have with the concept of 'truth' in the novel. The question of whether his statement is the truth is relative and cannot be proven. The only evidence that presents itself is the author-narrator's statement, and as I have attempted to establish, this appears to be distinctly unreliable in various ways. While questioning the exorbitant price of the train fare at the train station, he asks the clerk if he is attempting to "bamboozle" (ix) him. The clerk's somewhat comic response is to assure him that "[t]here is no bamboozlement here" (x). Is it possible that Martel is attempting to "bamboozle" his intended audience with this Martel-like creation? For Martel "bamboozlement" is the essence of storytelling. His Martel-like author-narrator exudes this philosophy in his perspective of fiction as a "selective transforming of reality" (x). In "Q and A With '*Life of Pi*' Author" (2006), Martel reveals that the information recounted by the fictional author reflects events taken from his real life and described in the *Author's Note* by Martel as author of the novel. The creation of this mirror-like effect pushes against the border of the internal frame,

contributing to its instability and cementing the unreliability of the author-narrator. The author-narrator's unreliability mediates the reader's reception of Pi's castaway narratives in the embedded frames, as it is the author-narrator who presents the written account of Pi's story.

The author-narrator yearns to produce a remarkable work of fiction "for the sake of greater truth" (Martel, 2001: x). This is yet another parallel with Martel's real life. He makes a profound remark that extends its reach and influence from the frame narrative, traversing the *passe-partout* and infiltrating the *ergon*, Pi Patel's life story. In his defence on writing a novel set in Portugal while sojourning in India, the author-narrator reveals his philosophical perspective of fiction. His emphatic statement on the irrelevance of needing to be physically located in Portugal to write his novel is substantiated by a theory of fiction that views it as a "selective transforming of reality" (x). Fiction is metaphorically compared to some object that can be twisted to "bring out its essence" (x). This perspective of fiction permeates the novel and is indicative not only of Martel's desire to privilege the better story over reality, but also alludes to a selective transformation of Pi's castaway tale. It initiates a deeply embedded unreliability that fosters mistrust in all the narrators and scepticism of their narratives. The major aim of this dissertation is to deconstruct Pi's 'truth'. However, Martel's privileging of the better story over reality, and the possibility that Pi's traumatic castaway experience is a selective transformation of the true events, problematizes any conclusive view of the truth.

In the *passe-partout* Adirubasamy foregrounds faith in his challenge to the author-narrator that Pi's story will convince him to believe in God. In Pi's account of his castaway tale, he constructs a fantastical narrative that interrogates existential and spiritual notions of faith. When Mr. Okamoto, in the official transcript, expresses disbelief in Pi's story that contains animals, he appeals to Pi to relate "what really happened" (Martel, 2001: 302) without "any invention" (302). Pi's witty repartee echoes the author-narrator's perspective of fiction as a "selective transforming of reality" (x). He rejects the binary oppositions of fact/fiction or reality/imagination while articulating a resolute belief in the transformative potential of the imagination. He cements this point of view when he berates the officials for wanting a story devoid of any surprises that requires no critical engagement with its content. He critically analyzes this type of story as one that is "flat" (302) and "immobile" (302), containing only

“dry, yeastless factuality” (302). Pi’s presentation of two stories reflects his capacity to transform his reality into stories that are so fantastical that they defy belief.

In the author’s note, the author-narrator describes how his attempt to “turn Portugal into a fiction” (Martel, 2001: x) “sputtered, coughed and died” (x). It is at this point of recognizing that his story was “emotionally dead” (xi) that he decides to go to South India in search of a better story. His encounter with Francis Adirubasamy in a coffee house in Pondicherry launches him on a trajectory that culminates with him finding the spark that brings Pi’s remarkable tale to life. This fortuitous opportunity would not have been realized if the author-narrator had succeeded in avoiding what he recognized in Adirubasamy’s widening eyes. The writer assumes that Adirubasamy is yet another curious Indian who is about to tell him a story that is “short of breath and short of life” (xi). However, his attention is arrested by one statement: “I have a story that will make you believe in God” (xii). This statement marks the position of the *passe-partout* “between the external and the internal edge-line” (Derrida, 1987: 12) of the frame narrative (*parergon*).

Mr. Adirubasamy’s promise, initiated in the frame that is embedded within the frame narrative, resembles Derrida’s *passe-partout*. Heller-Andrist (2011: 12) unpacks Derrida’s theory of this concept by highlighting the *passe-partout*’s performative function as instituting a site of communication between the *ergon* and *parergon*. In *Life of Pi*, this site of communication is activated when the fictional author meets Francis Adirubasamy, in a coffee house in Pondicherry, India. The story that Adirubasamy relates to the author-narrator in the frame within a frame is not revealed to the reader. The recounting of this remarkable tale is situated in the embedded narrative frames of the novel. In this way Adirubasamy’s frame “works the frame, makes it work...gives it work to do” (Derrida, 1987: 12). The *Author’s Note*, Pi’s embedded narrative frames, and the embedded frames in Part 3, are all dependant on and held together by Adirubasamy’s frame. Positioned between the *parergon* and *ergon*, it engages with some of the major themes of *Life of Pi*: religion, faith, and storytelling. According to Mill (2013: 51) Adirubasamy’s frame is pivotal in its treatment of faith in storytelling as its entrenchment of this theme has an overarching influence on the rest of the novel.

Adirubasamy's initial statement convinces the author-narrator of the veracity of his claim that Pi's story will make him believe in God. It is this tale that intrigues the fictive author, activates his imagination, and sends him on a journey in search of the real Pi Patel. The fictitious author and reader are drawn into a rumination on religion, faith, and belief in this intriguing introduction to Pi's story, and it is here that Martel establishes the foundation underpinning these issues. Cole (2004) draws attention to Adirubasamy's assumption that the author-narrator does not believe in God, an assumption that is confirmed in the fictional author's "[t]hats a tall order" (Martel, 2001: xii) response. The novel's engagement with issues of faith and belief, and the binary opposition of religion versus spirituality insinuates a belief in God, yet there is nothing about Pi's castaway tale that will irrevocably change one's perspective to believe in God if, for example, one is an atheist or agnostic. Stratton (2004: 6) points to the possibility that Martel's agenda is not "to prove the existence of God, but rather to justify a belief in God's existence". The writer suggests that in *Life of Pi* an existential belief in God is not a matter of fact or faith, but rather one that is "a better story" (6). At the onset of his conversation with Mr. Adirubasamy, the author-narrator, in a foreshadowing of Pi's autobiographical narration of his story, makes references to Christianity and Islam. In his response to Adirubasamy's outrageous claim, he questions whether the story has its origins "two thousand years ago in a remote corner of the Roman Empire" (Martel, 2001: xii), an oblique reference to Christianity. He wrongly assumes that Adirubasamy is a "Jehovah's Witness" (xii). His second assumption is that Adirubasamy is "some sort of Muslim evangelist", so he enquires if the story "take[s] place in seventh-century Arabia" (xii). The main character of the novel he will eventually write embraces three religions: Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. Pi's simple justification for not committing to one religion is because he "just want[s] to love God" (69). After Adirubasamy assures the fictional author that his story is "not so tall" (xii) an order that he "can't reach" (xii), the piqued writer initiates an engagement that he had previously gone to great lengths to avoid. "Please tell me your story" (xii) is a statement that sets the writer on a journey that he has been hungering for from the first line of the novel.

The irresolvable genre classification engendered from the beginning of the author's note is further muddied with Adirubasamy's use of the phrase "[o]nce upon a time" to begin his account of Pi's story. This beginning resonates with what Mill (2013: 55) suggests "is characteristic of fairy-tales". In the space of three lines the author-narrator reveals firstly, that while Adirubasamy spoke he "took notes, the elements of the story" (Martel, 2001: xiii).

Secondly, Adirubasamy confidently asserts that he knew Pi “very, very well” (xiii). His final revelation concerns Adirubasamy’s appeal to the writer to not only speak to the adult Pi, but to also “ask him all the questions” (xiii) he deems necessary. There are some crucial issues that Adirubasamy alludes to in these lines. His assertion that he “knew him very, very well” (xiii) reveals that Adirubasamy is attempting to establish himself as a reliable narrator of Pi’s story, while simultaneously indicating that he “knew” (xiii) the younger Pi intimately, not the “grown man” (xiii) that he exhorts the author-narrator to meet. Cole (2004: 22) points out that Adirubasamy is “only the story’s initial advocate, not its primary teller”. He emphasizes that although the author-narrator credits Adirubasamy for the “elements of the story” (Martel, 2001: xiii), Pi’s tale is told “in his voice and through his eyes” (xiv) by the author-narrator.

The “balance of narratorial power” between the author-narrator frame and this frame within a frame is “shifty” and this slipperiness pervades the embedded narratives as well (Reid, 1992: 17). Adirubasamy succeeds in arresting the fictional writer’s autobiographical narration of his search for a story with a “spark” (Martel, 2001: xi) and positions Pi’s story at the novel’s symbolic centre. As the writer remarks, he “hesitated for a moment” (xii) before his entire focus shifts to Adirubasamy’s story. The instruction to “pay proper attention” (xiii) is met with the author-narrator’s assurance that he will do exactly as instructed. However, he supplements this oral account with a written record of the story, and the shifty nature of narratorial power is evident in his arrested attention that now shifts to listening to Adirubasamy’s tale. The conclusion of Adirubasamy’s narrative marks the internal edge line of the frame narrative, and if acknowledged as the *passe-partout* of the complex framing of the novel, “it stands for the moment of transition at the location of the line” (Heller-Andrist, 2011: 13). The frame narrative of *Life of Pi* communicates with the *ergon* at the site of Adirubasamy’s narrative. The *passe-partout*, although allowing the work to appear, does not form “a frame in the strict sense” (Derrida, 1987: 12). Heller-Andrist (2011: 12) provides an uncomplicated view of the *passe-partout* as “a line that divides and unites at the same time”. Emphasizing the interaction of the *passe-partout* between the outside and inside, she states that “[i]t cuts a whole in two and holds two wholes together” (12). I traverse the *passe-partout* at this point, passing through it to the external edge of the *parergon*, initiating a crossing of its illocutionary boundary.

Ryan (1991: 175) defines an illocutionary boundary as one that delimits a speech act “within a text or a conversation”. When this boundary is crossed it “introduces a new speaker or a

new narrator” (175). While the illocutionary boundary delimits Adirubasamy’s conversation with the author-narrator, the crossing of this boundary facilitates an engagement with the distinctive narrative voice of the frame narrative’s fictional author. The fictional writer recounts how, “[l]ater in Toronto...among nine columns of Patels in the phone book” (Martel, 2001: xiii) he finds his “main character” (xiii). In tracking down Pi Patel, the author-narrator had a low expectation of the possibility that Pi would agree to recount his castaway tale. However, in a fortuitous twist, Pi agrees to meet with him. Many meetings follow this first encounter, and the writer reveals how Pi shows him the diary he kept during his journey and “the yellowed newspaper clippings that made him briefly, obscurely famous” (xiii). In two terse, miniscule sentences, he relates that Pi told him “his story” (xiii), and that “[a]ll the while” he “took notes” (xiii). An allusion of meticulousness is created through the “[a]ll the while” appendage, implying an attempt to influence the interpretation of Pi’s narrative that will be revealed after the *Author’s Note*. Traversing Part 1 of Pi’s narration is a series of eight author-narrator intrusions in the form of notes recorded during interviews with Pi Patel. The unreliability of the author-narrator’s narrative voice and Pi’s narration of his story are brought to the fore as there is no evidence of the fictional writer’s reliability in transcribing the outlandish events described by Pi Patel. The author-narrator considers it “natural that Mr. Patel’s story should be told mostly in the first-person – in his voice and through his eyes” (xiii-xiv), however, “any inaccuracies or mistakes” (xiv) should be ascribed to him as author of the novel. Janes’s (2013) implied reference to the unreliability inherent in delayed narration is evident in her exploration of the impact of Pi telling his story multiple times throughout the novel. Arranging “the iterations of the story in chronological order” (Janes, 2013: 120) reveals that the first recounting of his tale is to the Japanese officials who interviewed him, while Adirubasamy is the second recipient of Pi’s story. Janes (2013: 120) points out that Pi relates his story to the author-narrator “more than twenty years later”. It is this writer “who translates experience into text, and thus fixes the narrative in its final form” (120).

Approximately a year after meeting with Pi and taking notes of his oral recounting of his ordeal, the author-narrator encounters the second story in the tape that he receives from the Japanese Ministry of Transport (Martel, 2001: xiii). His agreement with Adirubasamy that Pi’s story “was, indeed, a story to make you believe in God” (xiii), especially after hearing the gruesome second story, replete with cannibalism and nakedly laying bare Pi’s descent to depths of immorality, is a blatant manipulation of the expected perceptions of his readers.

Martel's fictional author exercises a powerful influence on how Pi's narrative is interpreted and analyzed. The author-narrator is positioned as a mediator between "the implied author and the narrative" (Nelles, 1997: 46). The views of the implied author can, therefore, be inferred through the focalization of the author-narrator. The appeal to suspend disbelief and accept Pi's first narrative as his 'truth' is channelled through the author-narrator's assertion that Pi's story will make anyone believe in God. As a character, the fictitious author's unreliability is further demonstrated in his seemingly blithe statement that "[i]t seemed natural that Mr. Patel's story should be told mostly in the first-person – in his voice and through his eyes" (Martel, 2001: xiii-xiv). His acceptance of blame for inaccuracies and mistakes in his transcription of Pi's story is again a powerful indicator of the unreliability of the author-narrator's account of Pi's story. The origin of the story is deferred even further from Adirubasamy's promise to tell a story that will make the fictitious author believe in God.

At the end of the *Author's Note*, the author-narrator expresses his gratitude to Mr. Adirubasamy for relating Pi's story to him, and to Pi Patel for recounting his castaway tale and in the process entrusting him to tell a tale that will "not disappoint him" (xiv). Mill (2013: 55) believes that the narrative frame "appears to be reliable and believable despite the self-reflexive focus on fictionality". Her justification is based on the fictional writer's "matter-of-fact approach and his narrative's dramatic contrast with the style of Mr. Adirubasamy" (55). This perspective, however, fails to acknowledge the frame's slippage into an autobiographical mode. The fictional author credits the completion of the story to the contribution made by "Mr. Kazuhiko Oda, lately of the Japanese Embassy in Ottawa; Mr. Hiroshi Watanabe, of Oika Shipping Company; and, especially, Mr. Tomohiro Okamoto, of the Japanese Ministry of transport, now retired" (Martel, 2001: xiv). This rumination on the events that transpired after his interlude with Mr. Adirubasamy slips into an autobiographical mode. This mode is further reflected in his reference to Mr. Moacyr Scliar, who he acknowledges for giving him "the spark of life" (xiv) for his new novel based on Pi's story. This information is extracted from Martel's real life. Stratton (2004: xiv) states that this "spark" "ignited an international controversy, complete with accusations of plagiarism" (8). According to Scliar, Martel's *Life of Pi*, appears to have a "close resemblance" (Stratton, 2004: 8) to his novel, "*Max and the Cats*, first published in English translation in 1990" (8). Martel was cleared of all charges relating to the plagiarism of Scliar's novel, and according to Stratton (2004: 8) many critics "found the similarities to be superficial". This fact from

Martel's real life irrevocably blurs the boundary between fact and fiction, and this is further complicated by the author-narrator's acknowledgement of the grant awarded to him by the "Canada Council for the Arts" (Martel, 2001: xiv). This is an award that Martel received (Martel and Reynolds, 2018: xvi). As the "agent charged with meaning" (Nelles, 1997: 88), Martel's intrusion in the *Author's Note* problematizes any hope of instilling believability in the author-narrator as the "agent charged with speaking" (88).

The conclusion of the *Author's Note* demonstrates the novel's privileging of imagination over reality. The Martel-like author establishes his influence over the reception and interpretation of Pi's castaway tale in a surrealist weaving of his agenda into a call of action regarding the lack of support that artists receive. Wolf (2006: 26) draws attention to this function of framing as "essentially interpretive" and "controlling". Martel draws the expected reader into his "actual world" (Ryan, 1991: vii) when he directs his appeal to "we, citizens" (Martel, 2001: xiv), while the lack of support that artists like himself are confronted with is expressed in a powerful metaphor. Metaphorically, this aversion to supporting art denotes that "we, citizens," (xiv) must "sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality" (xiv). Janes (2013: 117) analyzes this metaphor as an ambitious endeavour contrived to manipulate the reader (expected and implied) "to read the right story, in the right spirit, or risk a form of terrible idolatry (the worship of 'crude reality')". The impact of the last statement of the *Author's Note*, marking the internal edge of the frame, infiltrates into the embedded narratives as the expected reader is being subliminally conditioned to abandon reality in favour of accepting "the better story" (Martel, 2001: 317).

The author-narrator's closing statement foreshadows Pi's rumination on an agnostic's last words on viewing the bright light at death's door: "Possibly a f-failing oxygenation of the b-brain". Worshipping at "the altar of crude reality" (xiv), agnostics "to the very end, lack imagination and miss the better story" (64). The agenda of the author-narrator is perhaps this simple: a focus on unravelling the 'truth' of Pi's story (reality) is akin to lacking imagination and missing the "better story" (64). The appeal can be summarized as a call to abandon what Pi views as boring "yeastless factuality" (63), and to reorder reality through storytelling, heralded by the imagination breathing life into reality. The internal limit of the frame narrative positions it "against, beside, and in addition" (Derrida, 1987: 54) to Pi's embedded narrative, "but, it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside" (54). According to Xu (2017: 43) the author-narrator "verifies" Pi's

castaway narrative, thus supplementing the lack in Pi's embedded narratives, and without this lack the embedded narratives would have no need of the frame narrative (Derrida, 1987: 59-60). Gilmore (1988: 520) highlights Derrida's focus on "frames, columns, borders, and other devices for marking limits". In his exploration of the term *parergon*, Richards (2008) focuses on the parasitical ability of the *parergon*. He emphasizes the ability of the *parergon* to operate independently while simultaneously being "related" (31) to the *ergon*, "beyond" (143) the work, yet "at the same time bound to the work" (143), supplementing Derrida's view of the *parergon* as being supplementary to the *ergon*.

As a parergonal structure, the frame narrative in *Life of Pi* has set the stage for the embedded narratives. The framed tale occupies a larger portion of the novel in comparison to the frame narrative, however, in this minimal role, the *parergon* of this novel succeeds in creating a distance between the implied author and the author-narrator. It also defers the origin of Pi's castaway tale and exposes the unreliability of both the fictional author's account and the vaunted claim to believe "the better story" (Martel, 2001: 317). Mill suggests that (2013: 49) if the *parergon* is ascribed the performative function of giving rise to a work, then Derrida's (1987) theory of the *parergon* occupying a secondary role or function is "destabilized". At the point of giving rise to the embedded tale, the frame "melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy" (Derrida, 1987: 61). According to Bal (1997: 52), if an "embedded text presents a complete story with an elaborate fabula, we gradually forget the fabula of the primary narrative". In *Life of Pi* although the frame narrative fades away at the point of contact with Pi's fantastical tale that spans over 300 pages, the cryptic end of the novel invites a revisiting of the *Author's Note*.

### **2.3. Embedded Frames, Embedded "Truth"**

The significance of the *parergon* as an extradiegetic narrative, narrated by the fictional author-narrator, and Mr. Adirubasamy's metadiegetic embedded narrative (*passe-partout*), have been explored in the context of Jacques Derrida's description of the performance of the frame in *The Truth in Painting* (1987). Martel's use of these framing devices in *Life of Pi* as a novel, points to possible performative functions that can be ascribed to them in framing the

embedded narratives. Höpfl (2006: 16) describes one function of the *parergon* as a structure that “marks the boundary of the work, identifies the point of difference and draws attention to the limit of the work itself”. The frame is emphasized as being secondary to the work. In the exploration of the frame narrative as a parergonal structure, I allude to the possibility of the frame narrative functioning as a supporting frame that sets the stage for Pi’s narrative. Furthermore, I suggest that as a supplement to the work (*ergon*), it irrevocably shapes the novel’s broader plot and thematic concerns. Kalaga (2016: 135), contributing to the academic scholarship on framing, suggests that boundaries should be viewed as a site of “exchange” where the textual boundary is “seen as a peripheral sphere of connection and immersion into textuality” (137). Adirubasamy’s narrative, embedded in the *parergon* functions as a site of communication between the frame narrative (*parergon*) and the *ergon* (work). Frow (1982), in his discussion on this mediating function of the frame, emphasizes that this view dispels the perspective of the frame functioning solely to differentiate the external from the internal.

In *Life of Pi* the framing narrative’s authority is not limited to Pi’s narration of his survivalist tale in Part 1 and Part 2 of the novel. It also extends its reach into Part 3, a section that incorporates two non-fiction texts into the textual fabula. This connection between the *Author’s Note* and the four embedded frames, is initiated by the author-narrator in the frame narrative. He accomplishes this firstly, through his confession that he had decided to relate Pi’s story “in the first person – in his voice and through his eyes” (Martel, 2001: viii-xiv). Secondly, he reveals that he had obtained not only a copy of the tape containing Pi’s interview with the Japanese officials, but also the final report, written by Mr. Okamoto, from the Japanese Ministry of Transport. Individually, the embedded frames operate potentially to buttress the other embedded frames, or alternately, to disprove the significance of inherent messages conveyed in the other frames (Berlatsky, 2009:174). According to Benford (2010: 324), “Russian nesting dolls, inset tales, frame narratives, Chinese boxes, [and] stories-within-stories” are some terms that are frequently used “when discussing multilevel novels” (324). Embedded frames can also be likened to boxed structures, or nested narratives (Nelles, 1997: 1). Nelles (1997: 132) describes this type of embedding as “vertical” embedding that is created when narratives “at different diegetic levels” are either “inserted within” each other, or alternately, “stacked on top of one another”. One commonly held assumption noted by Benford (2010: 324) is the tendency to view “the multilevel novel as a series of nested containers”.

Pi's narration of his castaway tale is split into a Part 1 and a Part 2, thus problematizing the categorization of the narration of his story as one narrative frame. Although narrated by one narrator, Pi Patel, these two sections (Part 1 and Part 2) will be analyzed as two disparate embedded frames. In Part 1, titled "Toronto and Pondicherry", Pi begins with a short narration of his present life as the adult Pi who resides in Toronto, Canada. The narrative then transitions to an earlier time frame: a narration of Pi's childhood years in Pondicherry, India. Part 2, titled "The Pacific Ocean", imbued with vivid images of nature in all its power and glory, foregrounds Pi's traumatic experience as the sole human survivor of a shipwreck. The transcript of the interview conducted by the Japanese officials is a frame that is positioned immediately after Pi's second narrative frame, "The Pacific Ocean". The official report that forms the last chapter of the novel is embedded within the interview transcript. Janes (2013: 110) alludes to this vertical embedding in *Life of Pi* as "texts embedded within texts", while A vertical embedding of the frames situates each frame on a different narrative level. Mr. Okamoto's report is thus a deeply embedded frame in comparison to Pi's narrative frames. Ryan (1991: 179) claims that this type of embedding restricts shifts from one level to another as "[b]oundaries must be crossed one at a time, either up or down". This theory of vertical embedding contributes to the dissertation's aim to demonstrate a correlation between the embedded frames of the novel and Pi's construction of his 'truth'. Viewed through the lens of vertical embedding, I argue that Martel's use of narrative framing is used as a deliberate strategy to provide Pi with a sanctum sanctorum where he presents his representations of the 'truth' of his survival.

Martel establishes the author-narrator as a character in the novel through his invocation of the "I" from the first line of the book: "I was hungry" (Martel, 2001: ix). Genette (1980: 229) explains this concept of the fictive author metamorphosing into a character in a novel through the example of Robinson Crusoe as both fictional author of Defoe's (1719), Robinson Crusoe, and "a character in his own story". As narratee, the author-narrator of *Life of Pi*, is positioned in an influential site of exchange between the frame narrative and Pi's embedded narrative. What emerges is Martel's engagement of the metafictional function of this frame to lend credibility to Pi's account of his castaway tale. The reordering from narrator to narratee strips him of authorial authority, thus relegating him to the position of "witness" (Bal, 1997: 28). Although the telling of Pi's story marks a reconfirmation of himself as narrator, he is also asserting his role as a reliable source of Pi's story, consequently implying the validity of Pi's tale. The reader is, therefore, bamboozled into a sense of

expectation that an unmediated account of Pi's tale will be related in Part 1/ "Toronto and Pondicherry" and Part 2/ "The Pacific Ocean". However, these expectations are subverted by Martel as the origin of the story has already been mediated at multiple points in the frame narrative. The author-narrator interviews the adult Pi, who in turn recounts the teenage Pi's castaway tale, and it is this tale that the fictional writer is now relating in his novel. According to Newman (1986: 144) when a spoken narrative is recorded as written text, it casts suspicion on the narrative voice. The position of a fictional author who "reads or listens to a story" "shifts to that of a narratee", and this results in a temporary blurring of ontological boundaries "between the fictional and the real" (Yeung, 2017: 434). Pantaleo's (2010: 14) suggestion that a transgression of "the ontological boundaries of the diegetic...increases...the complexity" of the narrative is clearly discernible in the novel. The blurring of boundaries is further complicated by disruption, in the form of author-narrator intrusions.

The intrusions by the author-narrator, interspersed throughout Part 1/ "Toronto and Pondicherry", are conspicuously absent in Part 2/ "The Pacific Ocean". In the *parergon* the author-narrator takes ownership for "any inaccuracies or mistakes" (Martel, 2001: xiv) in his telling of Pi's tale and accomplishes Pi's desire for his story to be told "in exactly one hundred chapters, not one more, not one less" (285), so the absence of any author-narrator intrusions in Part 2/ "The Pacific Ocean" appears to reveal more than it seeks to hide. The intertitle, "The Pacific Ocean", infers an infinity, a solitude, a boundlessness that simultaneously frees and restricts. The author-narrator has already infused a sense of realism into the novel, and the eight chapters from this figure's perspective inject a sense of realism into what is fundamentally a work of fiction, yet he chooses not to intrude on Pi's narration of his castaway story. Like God, he removes himself from the story world, and abandons Pi on the Pacific Ocean to relate the castaway chapter of his life in "his voice and through his eyes" (Martel, 2001: xiii-xiv). Nelles (1997: 149) draws attention to what he calls "the paradoxical effect" of narrative embedding. While it is associated with "producing the illusion of a more profound realism" (149), it also undercuts "that illusion at the same time" (149). In contrast to Part 2, where we only encounter Pi's voice, Part 1 resonates with both the author-narrator's and Pi's voices. In Chapter 1 Pi hints at having experienced some traumatic event and mentions Richard Parker by name, inadvertently creating an illusion that he is referring to a person. The expectation that is created is disrupted by an author-narrator intrusion that provides a physical description of the adult Pi. This is the first of eight author-narrator intrusions that pepper the landscape of Pi's narration in Part 1. These intrusions not only

establish the authority of the author-narrator, but also foregrounds the binary oppositions of fact/fiction and truth/fiction that Martel initiates from the beginning of the novel.

Martel's use of metalepsis is evidenced in the extradiegetic narrator's encroachment of the diegesis of Pi's narration. Genette (1980: 234-235) defines metalepsis as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse". In *Life of Pi*, the embedded frames are "[v]iolated by the trope of metalepsis" (Nelles, 1997: 154). In Chapter 2 the author-narrator establishes his role as the author who is constructing Pi's story from notes that he generates during his interviews with Pi Patel. The second intrusion, Chapter 6, disrupts the flow between Pi's account of how he takes control of his identity by divesting himself of the dreaded "Pissing Patel" (Martel, 2001: 20) moniker, and his description of the impact that Mr. Satish Kumar, his biology teacher, has on shaping his worldview. This disruption, while intrusive in nature, provides the reader with a glimpse into the life of the adult Pi. The author-narrator lauds Pi's cooking skills and marvels at his stocked pantry that he describes as "[a] reserve of food to last the siege of Leningrad" (25). This hoarding appears to be a psychological response to the deprivation Pi experiences during his traumatic castaway experience.

Chapter 12 marks the third author-narrator intrusion by drawing attention to a different type of disruption, one caused by the memory of a traumatic incident. According to the fictional writer, Pi exhibits a psychological reaction in response to memories that he dredges up in the telling of his story. The reliability of the memory in the recounting of a life story is called into question when the fictional author compares Pi's memory to an ocean on which he bobs. Pi reveals the unreliability of memory through the lesson that his father teaches him about true nature of a tiger. His father deliberately starves Mahisha, and when the tiger streaks from his cage to kill and eat the goat that he had entrapped in a cage, Pi is traumatized. He remarks that he does not know if he saw blood before he turned into his mother's arms or if he "daubed it on later, in [his] memory, with a big brush" (Martel, 2001: 36). In a metaphorical twist, the author-narrator reveals that "Richard Parker still preys" (42) on Pi's mind. At this point of the story, Richard Parker's identity is still shrouded in mystery. The reference to the author-narrator's efforts to adapt to Pi's very spicy food appears to be a deliberate act that Pi engages in, perhaps in a sly attempt to convince the writer that adaptation to any environment is not an impossibility.

Chapter 15, positioned between the novel's focus on zoology and religion, provides the reader with a glimpse of Pi's religious worldview. The author-narrator's vivid description of Pi's house as "a temple" (Martel, 2001: 45) that contains religious artifacts synonymous with Hinduism, Christianity and Islam proves that Pi still surrounds himself with the trappings of religion beyond his traumatic experience. However, the focus of the narrator's note is on Pi's multifaith icons that are spread throughout his house. This note introduces the main protagonist's multifaith belief in God that is narrated in the chapters that follow this author-narrator intrusion. Religion is not only one of the major themes of *Life of Pi*, but also one of the main issues that Pi grapples with in Part 1 of the novel. Pi's choice to major in both religious studies and zoology, connects the natural world with the spiritual world in Pi's universe. He credits the two Satish Kumars for influencing his decision to major in two diverse fields: the Sufi, for his decision to study religion and the biology teacher for inspiring an interest in zoology. Stephens (2010) remarks that it is this blending of science and religion that frames Pi's belief in God. Facts drawn from his present life in Toronto create a sense of verisimilitude for what is yet to be revealed in Part 2 of the novel. His passionate interest in religion contributes to his inability to choose one. Therefore, Pi becomes a follower of Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. Even when confronted by the pandit, imam and priest in Chapter 23, he refuses to choose one over the other. Cloete (2007: 323) argues that Pi's unwavering devotion to all these religions "girds him with innumerable deities and a monotheistic God upon who he can call when his survival is at stake". The repetition of religious rituals brings Pi a measure of "comfort" during his sea odyssey (Martel, 2001: 208). Thorn (2015: 3) points out that although Pi incorporates the rituals of Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam in his religious observances, he does not sacrifice "their individual characteristics". This is demonstrated in "The Pacific Ocean" when Pi describes how he adapted the religious rituals to "the circumstances" (Martel, 2001: 208): "solitary masses without priests or consecrated Communion hosts, darshans without murthis, and pujas with turtle meat for prasad, acts of devotion to Allah not knowing where Mecca was and getting my Arabic wrong" (208).

Martel presents some pivotal information on Pi's moral compass in Chapter 21. The fictional author reveals that these meetings with Pi highlight the "glum contentment that characterizes [his] life" (Martel, 2001: 63). The writer's re-examination of his own life demonstrates the potential of Pi's story to influence the reader's perception. Pi's thinly veiled philosophical

views on “dry, yeastless factuality” (63) and “the better story” (63), are encountered here for the first time. The author-narrator notes Pi’s privileging of moral truth over intellectual truth and remarks that even in the face of God’s silence Pi still clings to his faith in God. In the last two author-narrator intrusions that traverse and disrupt Part 1, the writer comments on his own clouded view of Pi’s life. Pi’s tale was so riveting that the writer missed vital clues about the adult Pi’s life. In the *Author’s Note*, the fictional author refers to Pi as “the main character” (xiii) of the story he will write, and this view of Pi as an element of the story has not undergone any discernible change. His final remark on Pi’s story having a happy ending is influenced by his discovery that Pi appears to be happily married to a pharmacist and that they have two children, Nikhil, and Usha. Chapter 36, juxtaposed with the section titled Part 2/ “The Pacific Ocean”, is poised on the cusp of the horror that awaits Pi on the Pacific Ocean. This horror is foreshadowed through the orange cat Moccasin that Usha awkwardly holds in her arms. This domesticated cat channels a reference to the untamed big cat, Richard Parker, who becomes Pi’s animal companion in the next section of the book, a cat that symbolizes all the horror associated with Pi’s castaway experience. In “The Pacific Ocean” he associates the colour orange with “the colour of survival” (138), a reference to the lifeboat that becomes both his saviour and captor. The lifeboat and almost every single survival aid that he finds on board is orange. Stratton (2004: 18) views Moccasin as a “pussy-cat version of Richard Parker” and points to the possibility “that the transcendental values that Richard Parker symbolizes are also very much present” in Pi’s home.

One of the aims of this dissertation is to explore the possibility that a correlation exists between Pi’s construction of his versions of ‘truth’ and the embedded frames. To this end I have presented compelling evidence on how the frame narrative foregrounds the unreliability of the narration of Pi’s embedded tale. This can be weighed against Herman’s (2009) proposition that evidence of unreliable narration problematizes interpretation. Although the voice of the narrator in Part 1 and Part 2 has been identified as Pi’s voice, the narration is twice mediated. The adult Pi is narrating events that transpired when he was a child and a teenager, “a younger version of the self whose words the older narrating-I animates in the here and now of the storytelling situation” (Herman, 299: 44). Chronologically, Part 1 and Part 2 of the novel is out of sequence, a strategy that enables Pi to control both fabula and plot. Pi begins his story in his present, as the adult Pi who lives in Toronto, then journeys back in time as a flashback to a possible origin story, Pondicherry. It is from this point of origin that the timeline demonstrates a somewhat logical sequence, leading to the events that

transpired on the Pacific Ocean. Janes (2013: 120), however, suggests that “[p]lacing the iterations of the story in chronological order” may reveal a different order of events. She positions Pi’s interview with the Japanese officials as the first point of origin, followed by the recounting of his story to Adirubasamy, and culminating, “more than twenty years later” (120) with the account related to the author-narrator. According to Prince’s (1981: 40) theory on narratology, a narrative is a collection of signs that establish the narration of the text and draws attention to the text’s “origin (narrator) and its destination (narratee)”. However, establishing the origin of Pi’s tale is problematized by the novel’s deliberate postponement of an origin.

The first line of Chapter 1 begins in the first-person with Pi’s declaration: “My suffering left me sad and gloomy” (Martel, 2001: 3). This simple sentence establishes Pi as a first-person narrator in the first embedded narrative that spans two parts of the novel and over three hundred pages. This embedding marks the beginning of Pi’s story, a story that has, up to this point, been shrouded in mystery. The frame narrative, as a *parergonal* structure, signals a “double crossing of boundaries” (Ryan, 1991: 177). The “ontological crossing” (177) is evidenced in the relocation of the author-narrator from the frame narrative, his “actual world” (vii), to the embedded narrative, as an intrusive author who traverses Part 1 with a series of eight italicized sections. The “illocutionary crossing” (177) introduces Pi as a new speaker, so the author-narrator’s appropriation of Pi’s voice and identity in the *parergon* “fades into the speech act” (177) of this new narrator who appears to be telling his story as “true fact” (177). What separates the frame narrative from Pi’s embedded narrative can be imagined as the limit represented by a change in narrative levels (Genette, 1980). Pi is technically already a character in the *Author’s Note* (*parergon*) and “the act of narrating which produces” (Genette, 1980: 228) Pi’s embedded narrative “is an event recounted” (228) in the frame narrative. Bal (1997: 53) posits a theory on the effacement of the frame narrative when “the embedded narrative presents a complete story with an elaborate fabula”. This effacement in *Life of Pi*, realized through the elaborate tale that Pi weaves in his embedded narrative, is further buffered by his presentation of two divergent stories in the interview with the Japanese officials, and the contents of Mr. Okamoto’s report in Chapter 100. The frame narrative (*parergon*) at the external edge of the *ergon*, fades away against the backdrop of Pi’s fantastical account of his survival as a castaway.

The *parergon* “touches and cooperates within the operation” (Derrida, 1987: 54) of Pi’s embedded narrative in the first line of Chapter 1: “My suffering left me sad and gloomy” (Martel, 2001: 3). The author-narrator’s proclamation in the *parergon* that he will tell Pi’s story literally through his eyes and in his voice is established in this line. Martel reveals two issues that define the adult Pi: suffering and the impact of that suffering. However, the next two lines do not reveal this “suffering” (3). Pi outlines how he mediated the suffering through “[a]cademic study and the steady, mindful practice of religion” (3). A foreshadowing of some elusive trauma is hinted at in Pi’s remark concerning the General’s Academic Medal that he believed he was denied: “I still smart a little at the slight. When you’ve suffered a great deal in life, each additional pain is both unbearable and trifling” (5). Martel utilizes analepsis and prolepsis as a narrative strategy in the unfolding of Pi’s story. Genette (1980: 40) defines the term analepsis as “any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment”. Prolepsis is categorized as “any narrative manoeuvre that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later” (40). Martel’s heavy reliance on foreshadowing in Part 1 of the novel sets the scene for Part 2, the over 200 pages that detail Pi’s survival.

The origin story of Pi’s name in “Toronto and Pondicherry”, connects Francis Adirubasamy, the source of his fantastical tale, with his name, thus creating a link between the *passe-partout* and the *ergon*. Pi reveals that Adirubasamy is the person responsible for naming him after a pool that was “the crowning the aquatic glory of Paris” (Martel, 2001: 11), the Piscine Molitor. Pi also details Adirubasamy’s insistence on teaching Pi to swim (both in the ocean and in a swimming pool) thus foreshadowing one of the factors that contributes to Pi’s survival in “The Pacific Ocean”. Water is a symbol of both life and death in the novel, so Pi’s familiarisation with different bodies of water plays a significant role in his survival of the shipwreck that claims his entire family. Stratton (2004: 9) suggests that in *Life of Pi*, “name is destiny”, highlighting the powerful allusive dimensions of Pi’s name. Piscine is defined as “relating to, or characteristic of fish” (Merriam-Webster, [s.a.]). Pi’s name, however, is also presented as a site of conflict as Pi details his struggle at school to escape being called “Pissing Patel” (Martel, 2001: 20). Martel foreshadows the training of Richard Parker on the lifeboat through this important event that defines Pi’s teenage years in Pondicherry. On the first day of secondary school, Pi sets in motion his escape from being taunted as “Pissing Patel” (20) by both teachers and pupils in his primary school, thus “marking the beginning of a new time” (21) for him. Derrida (1988: 77) states that the losing of “a proper name”, is “a

way of seizing the language, putting it to one's own use, instating its law" (77). This concept is mirrored in Pi's mastery over Richard Parker on the lifeboat. Mill (2013: 43) views this manipulation of his name as an instance in which Pi privileges "the power of the imagination".

Pi's belief in the transformative power of the imagination is foregrounded when he confronts his fear of being stuck with "Pissing" (Martel, 2001: 20) as a name. Called upon to state his name in each class, Piscine Molitor Patel prefigures his training of Richard Parker on the lifeboat when he trains his classmates and teachers to refer to him as Pi Patel. He becomes the master of his fear when he controls his narrative by subverting the authority roles of teacher/pupil and writing "My name is Piscine Molitor Patel, known to all as Pi Patel/  $\pi = 3.14$ " (22-23) on the chalkboard of every classroom on his first day at a new school. He then drew a circle with a diameter "to evoke that basic lesson of geometry" (23). By placing a double underline mark under Pi, emphasizes the import of the name and signifies a mastery of events beyond his control. When Pi remarks, "[r]epetition is important in the training not only of animals but also of humans" (23), it foreshadows his later mastery of Richard Parker. At the end of Chapter 5, Pi makes a profound statement that Martel exploits in his use of the title, *Life of Pi*. Pi states that "in that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe" (24), he "found refuge" (24). This irrational number becomes a symbol for the boundlessness of the Pacific Ocean and the infiniteness of his journey as the lone survivor of a shipwreck, surrounded by perils of sea and adrift in a lifeboat with a ferocious Bengal tiger.

Growing up in a zoo equips Pi with knowledge about animals that he exploits in his "yarn-spinning" (Martel, 2001: 167) in Part 2 and Part 3 of the novel. Pi's fascination with anthropomorphism, the belief that animals can be assigned human qualities, is viewed as foolish and dangerous. Pi's father, however, attempts to dispel this view when teaching Pi and Ravi about the true nature of tigers. To ensure that they never forget that a tiger is a vicious and deadly animal, he forces them to watch how a Bengal tiger kills and eats a goat. Mr. Patel extends this lesson by taking them around the zoo to point out the dangers that each animal presents. Pi's account of the lesson is laden with irony as his father warns them "never – under *any* circumstances – to touch a tiger, to pet a tiger, to put [their] hands through the bars of a cage, even to get close to a cage" (34). In Part 2/ "The Pacific Ocean", Pi's survival story features Richard Parker, a fully grown Bengal tiger and his only companion on a

lifeboat for a major portion of his castaway experience. The account of Mr. Patel's lesson is preceded by Pi's explanation of another lesson that he learns at the zoo, one that positions man as the most dangerous animal in the zoo. This eerily prefigures later events where Pi must confront gross human depravity in his fight for survival. In Chapter 11 Pi sets the stage for his interview with the Japanese officials when he describes how a female black leopard escaped from the Zurich Zoo in 1993 and eluded capture for more than two months. Pi skilfully weaves an event that is recounted in Part 2 of the novel into the leopard story. He alludes to the Japanese officials' disbelief concerning Richard Parker's disappearance into "a Mexican tropical jungle" (42). He describes their intention to find Richard Parker in the jungle as "laughable, simply laughable" (42).

Pi's explanation of the need for territorial dominance exhibited by animals provides a plot link to his setting of boundaries on the lifeboat and his mastery of a vicious Bengal tiger. His description of how circus trainers maintain their dominance as alpha males is used to provide the context for believability that is required to convince the recipient of his tale that it is possible to train a Bengal tiger within the confines of a lifeboat. All the information presented in this chapter of the novel have a factual tone. Pi's storytelling abilities are emphasized in his vivid description of the circus acts and when he asserts his view on the ordering of reality through fiction. He also introduces the concepts of captivity, escape, and freedom, referring not only to Richard Parker, but also to himself as a castaway trapped in a lifeboat on the vast Pacific Ocean. Martel establishes some of the major themes of the novel in Part 1: faith, storytelling, and religion, but at the same time he also maintains the fact/fiction and truth/fiction dichotomies at work in the novel. Crowley (2010: 185) analyzes Part 2/ "The Pacific Ocean" as a section that "details the realistic and surreal challenges Patel faces while in extremis such as placating Parker, avoiding starvation, madness, hopelessness, and seemingly impossible encounters with a shipwrecked cannibal and a carnivorous island". Pi articulates the magnitude of his suffering in the penultimate chapter of Part 2: "The rest of this story is nothing but grief, ache and endurance." (Martel, 2001: 283). Pi's presentation of his trauma in Part 2, with its deliberate omission of author-narrator disruptions, accomplishes the deconstructive agenda of the fictitious author and (by extension) Martel himself.

The vertical embedding of Pi's tale should have generated a distance between the author-narrator and the narration of Pi's story. However, this is subverted by the fictitious author himself as he entrenches his authority over the narrative by inserting himself into Pi's

castaway tale. The binary opposition of fact/fiction operating at the plot and story level is initiated through the author-narrator intrusions that attempt to authenticate Pi as a reliable narrator. The fictitious author's withdrawal from a section that frames the castaway narrative, shifts narratorial power to Pi. The division of Pi's narration into two sections, one in which the fictitious author interrupts Pi's narrative to narrate himself into Pi's story, and one that narrates itself through Pi's narrative voice, disconcerts the frame. The boundary that the author-narrator transgresses is a "shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells" (Genette, 1980: 236). By retracting himself from Pi's traumatic universe from the first page of Part 2, points to the possibility that "within-frame/cross frame inferences" (Wolf, 2006: 331) are being manipulated to authenticate Pi's account and point to its 'truth'. This is supplemented by the fictional writer's remark in the last line of Part 1: "This story has a happy ending." (Martel, 2001: 93). The splicing of this line between the last page of Part 1 and the first page of Part 2 alludes to textual interpenetration. The agenda of the focalization strongly leans toward convincing the reader to believe Pi's account of his castaway tale as a true account of his survival. Hartman's (1995: 547) caution against believing fantastic tales related by the "I" that "claims authorial privilege" in "imaginative literature" is perhaps a warning that best represents the problematic nature of an account written by an author who is writing in the voice of the protagonist. The narrative frames of *Life of Pi* "evoke a horizon of expectations, 'positioning or 'orienting' the narratee with respect to the ensuing frame" (Studniarz, 2017: 10). Mill (2013), commenting on the operation of the frames in *Life of Pi*, makes a powerful statement on the performative function of these frames: the "[i]nteraction between *ergon*, *passe-partout*, and *parergon*, has gained sufficient momentum to cast doubt on one narrative frame" (64), Part 3/ "Benito Juárez Infirmary, Tomatlán, Mexico".

Part 3/ Benito Juárez Infirmary, Tomatlán, Mexico is approximately thirty pages long and directly engages with the novel's complex concept of truth and its relative nature. Set against a backdrop of seemingly impossible odds, Pi's account of his sea odyssey in "The Pacific Ocean" section of the novel includes details that reflects his unreliability as a narrator. The mastery over Richard Parker, achieved using skills he picked up having grown up at a zoo appears impossible as it is virtually impossible to co-exist with a grown Bengal tiger within the confines of a lifeboat for 227 days. Stratton (2004: 15) refers to Pi's visit to the algae island, another fantastical construction, as "quite incomprehensible unless it is read retrospectively, with reference to Pi's second story". The second story that Stratton (2004)

refers to here is enclosed in the third embedded frame of *Life of Pi*, introduced by the author-narrator's voice, and presented as "excerpts" (Martel, 2001: 290) of an approximately three-hour interview. Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba, representatives of the Japanese Ministry of Transport were sent to the Benito Juárez Infirmary in Tomatlán, Mexico, to interview the sole survivor of the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*, Piscine Molitor Patel. After providing a brief background on events that transpired prior to the interview, the author-narrator withdraws from the scene. This withdrawal shifts the interview transcript to the realm of non-fiction. Martel's strategy appears to be a deliberate ploy to maintain the veracity and validity of the accounts rendered by Pi during the interview.

Chapter 96, which follows the author-narrator intrusion, covertly conveys two issues that Martel initiates in the *parergon*: hunger and the binary opposition of fact/fiction that is engaged when the interview begins. Pi mirrors the author-narrator's claim in the first line of the novel in his "I'm a little hungry" (Martel, 2001: 291) remark. Throughout the entire interview he appears to be hoarding food, a trait that the author-narrator reveals in the second author-narrator intrusion when he takes note of Pi's heavily stocked pantry. The officials also use food to elicit the responses that they want to hear from Pi and fail to note his detachment from the traumatic events that transpired. When Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba initially meet Pi, his response to their greeting is measured, calm and cordial. He even enquires as to whether they had "a good trip" (291). Mr. Okamoto assures Pi that they "had a wonderful trip" (291). Before Okamoto initiates a conversation about Pi's sea odyssey, Pi reveals that he "had a terrible trip" (291). This is a somewhat blithe remark that belies the horrific events that Pi survived as a castaway. Both Okamoto and Chiba disbelieve Pi's first account of what transpired after the *Tsimtsum* sank. They are not the only narratees who are confused at this point as Chapter 97 is a two-word chapter: "The story." (291). This problematizes a suspension of disbelief in favour of faith in storytelling as the reader is not privy to the contents of the story. This deliberate authorial act reveals the author-narrator's agenda to maintain control over Pi's narrative. The truth value of his narrative acts of editing and presenting Pi's story as it was related to him is cast in doubt. Okamoto draws attention to the binary opposition of real/ imagination at work in the novel when he expresses his disbelief to Pi: "Carnivorous trees? A fish-eating alga that produces fresh water? Tree-dwelling aquatic rodents? These things don't exist." (294).

Pi's revelation regarding Richard Parker's disappearance into the jungle in Mexico is also viewed as a fiction that Pi has created to mask the truth. Okamoto is adamant that it is virtually impossible to survive in a lifeboat with such "an incredibly dangerous wild animal" (Martel, 2001: 296). When pushed to reveal "what really happened" (302), his response points to the possibility that Pi is presenting a constructed version of what transpired and not the "straight facts" (302) that Okamoto and Chiba are attempting to elicit from him. Pi believes that life is a story and "the telling of something always become[s] a story" (302). Pi then relates another story, one that contains "dry, yeastless factuality" and devoid of any animals. The truth that Okamoto and Chiba expected leaves them shaken and horrified. Pi substitutes the animals with humans. The Japanese officials are confounded by this account and Pi's appeal for them to choose "the better story" (317) is met with relief. They choose the "the story with animals" (317) as the better story, thus affirming Pi's propensity to privilege imagination over reason and fiction over fact. The creation of different contexts for the two stories problematizes interpretation as the interpreter will have to choose to accept one story as "the better story" (Martel, 2001: 317). Pi raises this dilemma when he reminds the officials that in both the stories "the ship sinks, my entire family dies, and I suffer" (317) so "if it makes no factual difference to you and you can't prove the question either way, which story do you prefer?" (317). Pi's argument engages one of the major themes of the novel, the relativity of truth. Pi's challenge to the officials to accept his word as truth as they cannot prove which story is true and which story is false implies that truth cannot be separated from invention as "the telling about something" (302) is "already something of an invention" (302). In *Life of Pi*, invention operates as a mode to represent Pi's 'truth', a 'truth' that cannot be represented outside the realm of storytelling.

The illusion of verisimilitude is evoked once again in Chapter 100, an official report that is introduced in the author-narrator's voice. The report is the last embedded frame of *Life of Pi*. Okamoto's report, a non-fiction artifact, supports the truthfulness of the fantastical world created by Pi in the first story that he recounts to the Japanese officials. In this non-fiction text, Okamoto reveals that it is impossible to determine how the *Tsimtsum* sank. However, he states that Pi's story is "unparalleled in the history of shipwrecks" (Martel, 2001: 319). He concludes that Pi's account is "an astounding story of courage and endurance in the face of extraordinarily difficult and tragic circumstances" (319) and acknowledges that he has never heard of anyone surviving "so long at sea as Mr. Patel, and none in the company of an adult Bengal tiger" (319). Crowley (2010: 189) questions Okamoto's oversight in not addressing

Pi's "apparent compulsion to tell these irreconcilable tales". Okamoto's recommendation for the case to be closed overtly points to his acceptance of the "better story" (Martel, 2001: 317), the story with animals. The positioning of this official, non-fiction artifact as the last frame of the novel is a calculated strategy to convince the reader to accept the "better story" (317). However, the report, marking the end of the novel, reaches outside the novel with "its demand, producing not a structure with closure but an opening into further discourse, implicating its own listener, violating its own frame" (Newman, 1986: 153). The reader is left in an ambivalent state as Okamoto hints at Pi's unreliability as an interview subject. He notes that Pi's assessment of the weather on the day the *Tsimtsum* sank is "impressionistic and unreliable" (Martel, 2001: 319). His use of words like "speculation" and "conjecture" (319) in relation to the information gleaned from Pi, further entrenches the view of Pi as an unreliable witness. Okamoto, in an aside, alludes to the impossibility of Pi having survived 227 days as a castaway with an adult tiger as sole companion. He uses his experience as an investigator to justify his analysis of Pi's castaway tale. He ends the report with a cryptic remark: "Very few castaways can claim to have survived so long at sea as Mr. Patel, and none in the company of an adult Bengal tiger" (319). Although Okamoto appears to have accepted "the better story" (317), he leaves the reader in a state of doubt. The challenge presented by the novel at this point is to embrace "the better story" (317) as Pi Patel's 'truth'.

This dissertation's analysis of the embedded frames' performance in *Life of Pi* points to the possibility of a correlation between Pi's construction of his versions of 'truth' and the embedded frames that appear to have been purposely constructed as fictional enclosures wherein Pi narrates his trauma. The first two embedded frames, Part 1 and Part 2 of *Life of Pi*, are complex embeddings that illustrate a "total enclosure and almost entrapment, a complete separation and disconnection" (Kalaga, 2016: 135) and at the same time functions as a boundary that "allows for exchange" (135). Martel's use of metalepsis, evident in the author-narrator intrusions in Part 1, blurs the boundary between reality and fiction allowing for an exchange between the frame narrative and Part 1 (Guillemette and Lévesque, 2016). The marked absence of author-narrator disruptions in Part 2 creates an allusion of Pi being in total control of the narrative. This embedded frame is a type of *sanctum sanctorum* that totally encases Pi's survival story.

"The Pacific Ocean", the second embedded frame of the novel, does not encroach on nor does it influence Part 3: "Benito Juárez Infirmary, Tomatlán, Mexico", the third embedded

frame. The interview transcript is a non-fiction artifact that is not generated through the narrating function of Pi as storyteller. The transcript of the interview, conducted by the Japanese officials, encases Pi's ambiguous double narrative. Pi controls his narratives within the parameters of this frame using the same strategy that he uses in Part 2. He uses storytelling as a mode to narrate his trauma. However, the sections that are in Japanese and the author-narrator's confession that "excerpts from the verbatim transcript" (Martel, 2001: 290) have been provided compromise the reliability of the account that is presented. Okamoto's report is also compromised as the author-narrator presents only the "essential part" (319) of the report. The gaps created by the implied omissions cannot be supplemented as the unreliability of the author-narrator has already been established in this chapter of the novel. Furthermore, the sequential ordering of the novel's structure appears to be a deliberate narrative strategy employed to engender a distance between Pi's construction of his castaway tale and the two divergent versions that he presents to Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba during the interview. Pi's challenge to suspend disbelief and a search for 'truth' in favour of accepting "the better story" (317) has a profound influence as evidenced in Okamoto's final report that echoes this sentiment. Part 1 of Pi's embedded narrative hints at some deep trauma that the main protagonist experienced at some point of his life. However, Part 2 and Part 3 overtly expose his traumatic universe and hints at Pi's ability to transform this universe through 'words'. Storytelling emerges as a coping mechanism that allows Pi to articulate his trauma as narrator of his castaway tale.

## Chapter Three

### Gods and Stories: The Better Story

#### 3.1. Storytelling, religion, faith, and belief, in *Life of Pi*

Yann Martel: The subtext of *Life of Pi* can be summarized in three lines:

- 1) Life is a story.
- 2) You can choose your story.
- 3) A story with God is the better story. (Renton, 2005: para. 6)

*Life of Pi* foregrounds the value of storytelling as a fundamental theme and challenges the reader to privilege the infinite possibilities of imaginative play over the relatively prosaic and constricting limitations of rationalist, unmediated accounts of lived experience. Martel engages this binary opposition between imagination and reality in his “tale of telling tales” (Scherzinger, 2006: 58). The novel also prominently features issues of faith and belief, and the dichotomy of religion/ spirituality. Martel, in an interview with Jennie Renton (2005), emphasizes his belief that both storytelling and religion require a suspension of disbelief. He describes the novel’s subtext in three sentences: “1) Life is a story. 2) You can choose your story. 3) A story with God is the better story.” (Renton, 2005: para. 6). In the frame narrative of *Life of Pi*, the theme of storytelling and its relation to spirituality, is initiated in the *Author’s Note* and gains momentum as the novel progresses to its cryptic conclusion. In the *Author’s Note (parergon)*, the author-narrator and reader (expected and implied) are drawn into a contemplation of some of these major issues. Swanepoel (2020: 1), in her exploration of naming and renaming in *Life of Pi*, highlights how “stories, truth and spirituality” intersect in the novel. Martel’s thematic emphasis on spirituality and the transformative power of storytelling is encapsulated in Francis Adirubasamy’s statement: “I have a story that will make you believe in God” (Martel, 2001: xii). In this chapter of the dissertation, I explore Martel’s interweaving of storytelling, religion, faith, and belief through the lens of Pi Patel’s physical and psychological survival in *Life of Pi*. Martel’s ambivalent depiction of Pi’s ‘truth’ is refracted through the textual prism of these imbricated themes from the frame narrative (*parergon*), filtering it through Adirubasamy’s narrative frame (*passe-partout*), and the tapestry of Pi’s remarkable life story (*ergon*). I also analyze Pi’s quest for meaning through the synthesis of disparate religious narratives in the embedded narrative frames of the novel.

At the end of this chapter, I offer an intertextual reading of Pi's castaway tale, comparing his story to that of the biblical Job.

The *Author's Note*, generally viewed as a factual element of a text, is presented as the starting point of this novel, where the fictional author-narrator begins his narrative detailing how the "book was born" (Martel, 2001: ix). Metaphorically, this statement can be viewed as the author-narrator's depiction of the literary equivalent of a creation myth. This perspective can also be aligned to Pi's fascination with religious narratives that offer their own unique versions of the world's creation. The author-narrator's account of how the Indians insist on telling him stories when they discover that he is a writer subtly points to Martel's intention to convey the novel's focus on the creative act of storytelling. In the *passe-partout* of the novel, Francis Adirubasamy's claim that he has a story that will make the author-narrator "believe in God" (Martel, 2001: xii) is initially met with disbelief. However, the author-narrator reveals that this disbelief is dispelled after he listens to the taped interview between the Japanese officials and Pi. It is then that he agrees with Mr. Adirubasamy "that this was, indeed, a story to make you believe in God" (Martel, 2001: xiii). Cole (2004: 23) points out that this response is mystifying as the report contains no reference to God or religion and "is by no means a categorical expression of belief in the truth of Pi's story". The impact of Adirubasamy's tale is viewed as partially dependent "upon the disbelief of his listener", and partially on the "author-narrator's profession of faith" Cole (2004: 22). The author-narrator's profession of faith in the frame narrative is expected to manipulate the readers of the novel to demonstrate the same level of faith. Cole (2004) believes that this expectation reflects Martel's appeal for a complete suspension of disbelief in favour of taking a leap of faith, thus emphasizing the working of faith and belief in the novel. Wagner (2016) also highlights this issue by drawing attention to the possibility that Martel is inviting the reader to believe Pi's better story without any expectation of proving that this is indeed a true account of his castaway tale. In *Life of Pi*, Martel foregrounds one of the general premises underlining many theoretical discussions of storytelling: namely, the reader's necessary suppression of doubt or incredulity when engaging with a text. This power of storytelling to influence the reception and interpretation of Pi's story is highlighted not only in the *Author's Note*, but also in Pi's embedded narrative frames, the interview transcript in Part 3 of the novel where he presents two versions of his castaway tale, and Okamoto's final report.

Pi's embedded narrative, presented in a first-person narrative perspective, is an illusion created by the author-narrator who is in fact narrating Pi's oral tale in written form. This transcription of Pi's oral account is not entirely dissimilar to religious texts that claim divine authenticity as accurate, incontrovertible records of religious figures and their various acts and – significantly- parabolic stories. In the *Author's Note*, the fictional author's insistence that Pi's narrative "should be told mostly in the first-person – in his voice and through his eyes" (Martel, 2001: xiii-xiv), reveals a strategy to focalize the story through Pi Patel. The unreliability of the account, created by this writing technique, works to destabilize the text, yet the reader is expected to suspend any doubt as to the veracity of the story that is presented as Pi's castaway tale. The author-narrator also points out that Pi's narrative may contain "inaccuracies or mistakes" (xiv) due to the tale being doubly mediated, recounted in the first instance by Pi Patel to the author-narrator, and secondly as the written story that the fictional writer constructs from the notes that he takes down during the interviews with Pi in Toronto. The communicative aspect of the *parergon* is demonstrated in the author-narrator's confession that Pi's narration of his story in Part 1 and Part 2 of the novel may be an inaccurate account. The unreliability of the author-narrator can be paralleled with Pi's decision to relate the story with animals to the author-narrator, perpetuating an illusion that this is account represents the 'truth'. However, he omits any reference to the second story that he presents to the Japanese officials and this omission exposes his unreliability as the narrator of his story. Georgis (2006: 167) suggests that although Martel is aware of the limitations inherent in retelling Pi's tale, "nonetheless, he stages for us the value of witnessing and testimony". However, what Martel cannot escape is the inevitable scrutiny of the author-narrator's manipulation of Pi's oral rendition of his story. Any distortions, omissions, or additions to Pi's original account cannot be determined or quantified and the reception thereof relies again on a willing suspension of disbelief and faith in storytelling containing its own truth.

In Part 1/ "Toronto and Pondicherry" and Part 2/ "The Pacific Ocean", Pi is presented as an adept weaver of tales who uses both foreshadowing and flashbacks to convey the story of his life. Pi recounts the beginning of his tale from his present life, the "happy ending" (Martel, 2001: 93) that the fictional writer records in the note that forms the last author-narrator intrusion. This contrasts with Adirubasamy, who begins his narration of Pi's story with "[o]nce upon a time" (xiii). The timeline of Pi's narration, comprising Part 1 and Part 2 of the novel, begins at the end of his tale and uses flashbacks to move the narrative towards his

castaway experience. Martel's employment of this storytelling technique is inherently manipulative in its strategy to present Pi's story as a 'real' account encompassing his origins, formative childhood experiences and a depiction of his domestic life prior to the ill-fated voyage upon the *Tsimtsum*. This illusion is bolstered by the author-narrator's decision to tell the story in Pi's voice and through his eyes, lending it a biographical or auto-fictional quality. However, the suspension of disbelief begins to unravel when the reader is confronted with the ambiguity engendered in the double narrative presented in the interview transcript. Pi challenges the officials and the reader to look beyond factual truth and accept storytelling as its own truth. The autonomous act of storytelling allows Pi to shape and present one version of his story to the Martel-like author in comparison to the two versions that he presents during the interview with Okamoto and Chiba. This control that Pi wields over the act of storytelling emphasizes Pi's use of these stories as "currency and capital" (Green and Bradford, 2011: 97). It is his means of connecting with both the author-narrator and reader, and the recounting of his experience as a survivor of a traumatic event. However, the larger concern raised by the novel appears to be the relativity of truth in Pi's acts of storytelling. To suspend disbelief and believe one version of Pi's castaway tale, "the better story" (Martel, 2001: 317), requires an acceptance of the more palatable or believable account. Pi's reinvention of his castaway experience appears to be a projection of his faith in the idea that storytelling gives rise to its own truth. In Part 1 of the novel, Martel delves deeper into another major concern raised in the novel and that is Pi's strong ties to religion and a universal view of God's love.

Martel foregrounds a connection between religion and science in Pi's choice of academic study: "religious studies and zoology" (Martel, 2001: 3). As Stephens (2010: 42) observes, Pi frames his belief in God "within the context of having to balance science and religion". This framing of Pi's belief is informed by Martel's perspective of science and religion as complementary systems of knowledge (Renton, 2005). Martel has clearly infused his conviction that science is "a gateway to the greater mystery" (Renton, 2005: para. 05) into his protagonist's synthesis of faith-based belief structures and scientific discourse. However, Pi's appeal to Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba to choose "the better story" (Martel, 2001: 317) requires a total abandonment of the empiricist rationality that characterizes scientific inquiry. In Chapter 1, Pi's poignant statement that "the steady, mindful practice of religion slowly brought [him] back to life" (Martel, 2001: 6) demonstrates the restorative function that Martel ascribes to religion in *Life of Pi*. However, on the lifeboat it is Pi's faith and belief in science

that ensures his physical and psychological survival to a large extent. This is portrayed against a backdrop of relative freedom, the vast Pacific Ocean that is now Pi's jailer. Confined within the boundaries of the lifeboat and raft, Pi realizes that water is the most precious commodity in any hope of survival. The depth of Martel's background research is brought to the fore in Pi's efforts to use the solar stills that he finds in the lifeboat's locker. His initial doubt in its ability to produce drinkable water is soon dispelled when he discovers that it has produced eight litres of water, and in his exaltation, he compares the distillate pouches to "cows grazing in the field" (Martel, 2001: 188) and the water to "fresh milk" (188). In this way Pi weaves Hindu religious imagery into this account of his survival strategy. During the encounter with the blind Frenchman, Pi reveals the sacredness of cows to a Hindu: "I am a Hindu and we Hindus consider cows sacred" (252).

In the context of Pi's first embedded narrative frame, the successful training of Richard Parker on the lifeboat can be attributed to the scientific background that Pi is exposed to as the son of a zookeeper. Applying reason and a precise methodology predicated on the dynamics of control to train the tiger ensures Pi's physical survival. When the Japanese officials balk at believing that Pi survived the journey with an adult Bengal tiger, and state that they are "just being reasonable" (Martel, 2001: 298), Pi's response reveals the novel's sustained emphasis on the privileging of the imagination over reason. According to Stratton (2004: 8) the deconstruction of this "reason/imagination binary hierarchy is the project of Martel's narrative" and this is clearly evidenced in Pi's impassioned response to the officials' disbelief. Pi emphasizes how he applied reason "at every moment" (Martel, 2001: 298), and that it is "excellent for getting food, clothing and shelter" (298). However, while reason "is the very best toolkit" (298) and nothing beats it "for keeping tigers at bay" (298), Pi warns against being "excessively reasonable" (298). When Pi remarks that an excess of reason entails "throwing out the universe with the bathwater" (298), it reveals a strategy to manipulate the Japanese official's perspective of "believability" (298). The conversation that precipitates the reason/imagination argument circles around a disbelief in Pi's account of Richard Parker disappearing into the Mexican jungle.

The novel's engagement with the binary opposition of belief/unbelief resonates in Pi's focalization of believability. According to Pi, life has no meaning if "you stumble at mere believability" (Martel, 2001: 297), even "God is hard to believe, ask any believer" (297). Duncan (2008: 173) comments on this aspect of the novel by drawing attention to the novel's

invitation “to suspend disbelief when the ‘author’ calls fiction ‘the selective transforming of reality, the twisting of it to bring out its essence’ (Martel xxx)”. Pi’s philosophical rumination on how “the telling about something – using words...” is “already something of an invention” (Martel, 2001: 302) is also highlighted. Duncan (2008: 173) suggests that the emphasis on these characteristics of storytelling “cast doubt upon narrative as a means of conveying the substance of trauma”. In *Life of Pi*, Pi appears to be selectively transforming the true story of his castaway experience. Martel’s use of a non-linear narrative filled with digressive flashbacks and authorial interjections reinforces the underlying ambivalence of Pi’s tale. The events are deliberately chosen and revealed at specific points of Pi’s narration – denoting a selective transformation of events. The chronological arrangement of Pi’s life story conveys this in its representation of his survival through a back story of his present life in Toronto. Martel juxtaposes a colourful account of Pi’s childhood and teenage years in Pondicherry with the horrific account of the castaway period of his life. Martel devotes approximately two hundred pages of text to a visually detailed, first-person narrative of Pi’s castaway experience on the Pacific Ocean in Part 2 of the novel, replete with elements of the fantastic, magical realist flourishes and hallucinatory asides. Furthermore, he blurs the line between fact and fiction with an interview transcript that encloses Pi’s ostensibly allegorical account of what really transpired after the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*.

In the embedded frames of the novel, Pi’s representation of his ‘truth’ emerges not only in the stories that he recounts to the author-narrator, the Japanese officials, and to the reader, but also through his focalization of religion. Thorn (2015: 9) points out that “[n]ot only is *LOP* thoroughly religious, it is thoroughly multi-religious”. As an adult, Pi confesses to still maintaining his “strange religious practices” (Martel, 2001: 3). His continued observance of myriad belief systems is depicted in the author-narrator’s description of Pi’s home as a veritable temple full of religious icons and symbols from all three religions. His parents’ inability to understand his refusal to follow one religion reflects generally held beliefs that Martel attempts to challenge and subvert through Pi’s focalization. In the ABC News (2006: para. 12) interview, Martel states that he sees “in all great religions the same frame of being, only seen from a different perspective”. Pi’s fascination with the stories that illustrate the beliefs of each faith and his belief that “[a]ll religions are true” (Martel, 2001: 69) foreshadow his tenacious hold on the sacred acts associated with Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam during the castaway period of his sea odyssey. His perspective of religion is underpinned by the rationale that all religions should be viewed as stories that inspire and

lead one to a more holistic understanding of religion and belief in God. Pi demonstrates that a belief in God or religion requires a total suspension of unbelief and an active demonstration of faith. As Pi states, “[i]f you stumble at mere believability, what are you living for?” (Martel, 2001:297). This statement that convinces Okamoto to believe the better story, originates from Pi’s own battle with unbelief. His first spiritual encounter with the Christ of Judeo-Christian religious belief systems is met with doubt and hesitation. He describes Christ as “that troublesome rabbi of long ago” (56) who he met with “disbelief and annoyance” (56). In a flashback to the India of his teenage years, we encounter Mr. Kumar, the atheist, who broadens Pi’s perspective of religion and belief in God. Pi aligns his belief in God and religion with the atheist’s belief that there is no God and no afterlife. According to Pi, the atheist’s belief requires an imaginative leap of faith, unlike the agnostic who is grounded in “dry yeast-less factuality” (64). His scathing criticism of the agnostic is based on their acceptance of “doubt as a philosophy of life” (28). In comparison to the atheist who epitomizes faith, the agnostic chooses “immobility as a means of transportation” (28). Martel’s depiction of the significance and transcendent power of religious faith is represented through Pi’s focalization of these issues, and as a narrative strategy, it functions as an exhortation to reject the agnostic’s “lack of imagination” (64). Pi points out that the danger of embracing a philosophy that relies on reason will inevitably lead to missing “the better story” (64). On a psychological level, the better story in Pi’s narration is the castaway tale with animals, not as an allegorical account, but as a representation of the ‘truth’ of his sea odyssey.

Pi’s faith in God and obsession with the metaphysical realm of religious belief is evident in both his adult life and the extensive flashbacks to his childhood in Pondicherry. However, this inclusive theological inclination wanes during the castaway period of Pi’s life. Stratton (2004: 15) highlights this in her observation that “Pi does not spend much time reflecting on religion” during his sea odyssey. On the other hand, Pi makes God “the object of frequent and heartfelt exhortations and expressions of gratitude” (15). One example that Stratton (2004) cites is Pi’s response when he first realizes the profound danger of his situation as a castaway and cries out, “Vishnu preserve me, Allah protect me, Christ save me, I can’t bear it!” (Martel, 2001: 15). The 227 days of torment and trauma that Pi experiences on the Pacific Ocean reveals a world that is seemingly void of God’s presence and mercy. Pi suffers an existential crisis where he perceives God as being literally absent. At one point Pi reveals how he almost lost all faith in God, and this is poignantly declared in his plaintive insistence that “God’s ark was a jail. God’s wide acres were slowly killing me. God’s ear didn’t seem to

be listening.” (Martel, 2001: 209). This appears to signal the death knell of Pi’s spirituality and his positive perspective of religion as an edifying spiritual force integral to the self’s sustenance and growth. However, Pi’s conclusion of this episode reveals the resilience of his faith and his ability to transcend suffering and despair. He describes this despair as “a heavy blackness that let no light in or out” (209), a “hell beyond expression” (209). The spiritual battle that Pi is confronted with at this point of his castaway experience exposes the abyss of this existential despair which is rebuffed with a remark of affirmation: “I thank God it always passed” (209). At the point when he realizes that death may be imminent, he determinedly asserts that “so long as God is with [him]” (148), he will survive. Pi reaffirms this connection with God in his second story when he remarks that after he killed the cook and ate his liver, he “turned to God” (311) and “survived” (311). Stratton (2004: 15) asserts that when Pi finds himself stranded in a universe where “God is notably absent throughout the events narrated”, he only turns to God “at the very end of the story, after he has feasted on human flesh and organs” (15). In the story without animals, the psychological aspect of his survival is attributed to his faith and belief in God. The listener and reader are not privy to what the phrase “turned to God” (Martel, 2001: 311) actually means from a religious or faith-based perspective. However, with a minimum number of words, Pi succeeds in conveying one of the novel’s most significant themes: a world with God in it is to be valued far above one that has a tangible absence of his presence.

In an interview with Renton (2005: para. 4), Martel reveals his own spiritual quest when he states that *Life of Pi* should be viewed as a book that encourages one to discover life “through a religious perspective”. Martel’s secular background and how it shapes perspectives on religion and belief in God is emphasized in his interview with Ray Suarez (2002). Martel reveals his own “suspension of cynicism” (Ray Suarez, 2002: 4) in relation to “organised religion” (4) and explains that this new understanding of religion can be ascribed to his exploration of the texts of Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. The parallel between Martel’s and Pi’s religious background and belief in God is strikingly conveyed in Pi’s description of his parents’ religious outlook. In the novel, Pi describes his father as “rich, modern and as secular as they come” (Martel, 2001: 65) and his mother as “bored and neutral on the subject” (65). In comparison to his own spiritual vacillations, Martel creates a character who is a “practicing Hindu, Christian and Muslim” (64). During his amusing encounter with the priest, imam and pandit, Pi is introduced to his first “interfaith dialogue” (70). The attempts by “the three wise men” (64) to force Pi to choose one religion over the other two fail to account for

Pi's multifaith approach to worshipping a universal God. His "I just want to love God" (69) outburst signifies Pi's hunger for a deeper connection with God, regardless of the contradictions that each wise man points out in relation to the other religions. Teske (2014: 285) suggests that it is possible to resolve these contradictions "by reducing all religious experience to its essence conceived of as love". Pi's reaction also emphasizes his belief that Hinduism, Christianity and Islam contain their own truth. It is this indomitable religious worldview that sustains him and contributes to his survival. Pi's performance of various rituals synonymous with each religion enables him to bring order into his chaotic physical and psychological situation.

The multi-cultural, multifaith philosophy, illuminated in *Life of Pi*, interlinks faith, belief, religion, and storytelling in the novel to challenge generalized perspectives of these issues. The interweaving of these major issues throughout the novel eventually exerts an influential force on the acceptance of one of the two stories that Pi presents to the Japanese officials during the taped interview. In a *BBC News* (2002) interview, Martel draws attention to the reader who is confronted with choosing the story with animals or the more horrifying story of Pi confronting his own cannibalism. The 'better story' that is validated through Okamoto's report and the *Author's Note* in *Life of Pi* is the story with animals, the story that challenges credulity in its inclusion of a Bengal tiger as Pi's sole companion for the major portion of his castaway tale. Okamoto's acceptance of this narrative is proof of Martel's thesis about the power of storytelling. When faced with a decision between the story with animals and the horrifying alternative, Okamoto demonstrates 'literary faith', where the interviewer is 'converted' into a believer of Pi's version of events. In the *Author's Note*, the author-narrator exercises 'literary faith' when he reveals that he agreed with Adirubasamy after he had listened to the taped interview. The 'converted' believer in the *parergon* of the novel connects storytelling and religion in one remark: "this was, indeed, a story to make you believe in God" (Martel, 2001: xiii).

### **3.2. Pi's quest for meaning through the synthesis of disparate religious narratives**

*Life of Pi*, as a bildungsroman, unfolds a story that interweaves religion and a belief in God through a novel that focalizes the castaway tale of its main protagonist Piscine Molitor Patel “in his voice and through his eyes” (Martel, 2001: xiii-xiv). In this chapter of the dissertation, the significance of religious narratives in Pi's survival stories is explored against the backdrop of his remarkable “story of courage and endurance” (319). Storytelling and religion are equally important to Pi as he believes that both require a suspension of incredulity and an active demonstration of faith. As a child, Pi “devoured the comic books of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and an illustrated children's Bible and other stories of the gods” (66). According to Teske (2014: 28) the novel resolves the conflict in Pi's pluralist religious identification through its interpretation of “religions as narrative fictions”. Pi's complicated multifaith religious worldview is reinforced by these stories that illustrate the different beliefs of Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. Georgis (2006: 167) suggests that the impact of the stories on Pi substantially influences his decision to embrace all three religions. The writer also makes an important observation regarding the “ease and synchronicity” with which he follows all three, and it is this fluidity that becomes a marked characteristic of Pi's multifaith approach.

Pi's account of a pivotal event that occurred when he “was fourteen years old - and a well-content Hindu” (Martel, 2001: 50) illustrates his religious worldview in a natural setting, illuminating the union between man, nature, and God. On a holiday trip with his family to Munnar, Kerala, he recounts how he first “met Jesus” (50). Munnar is a symbol of his multifaith belief in God. These three hills are alluring to the inquisitive young Pi, who notes how: “on each on stood a Godhouse” (51). The hill on the right had a Hindu temple, the hill in the middle held a mosque and the hill on the left “was crowned with a Christian church” (51). This landscape is a spatial embodiment of Pi's belief that all religions point to one path that leads to one universal God. It is in Munnar that Pi has his first encounter with the religious rituals, symbols, and the “Story” (53) that underpins Christian belief systems. However, Pi's introduction to Christianity is from a Catholic perspective that problematizes his understanding of the gory and bloody scenes that he views in the visual representations of Christ's suffering and crucifixion. His credulity is tested when he is confronted with “a

Story” (53) in which God’s son had to die to atone for the sins of humanity. Pi views this story as a “downright weird story” (53) and so he asks for another story, one that he “might find more satisfying” (53). Thorn (2015) presents a somewhat daring proposition that provides a possible reason for Pi’s inner conflict regarding Christ’s sacrifice. In the second story Pi’s mother is killed by the cook and cannibalized. Thorn (2015: 11) suggests that “[b]y offering her body and blood so that Pi may eat and live, his mother gives herself as a communion host to her son”. However, “Pi’s maternal cannibalism is sublimated so deeply, under so many layers of projection and displacement, that it nearly disappears” (11). Thorn (2015) compares her sacrifice to that of Christ’s: a sacrifice that is motivated by love. Pi’s appeal for a “more satisfying” (Martel, 2001: 53) story is perhaps yet another layer of projection and displacement that he adds to the reinvention of his castaway tale.

Pi’s fascination with religious narratives is foregrounded in his questioning of whether this religion had more than one story, as “religions abound with stories” (Martel, 2001: 53). The novel’s subliminal promotion of religion as stories is conveyed through Pi’s voracious appetite for religious stories, and this is clear in his appeal for a more satisfying story from the Bible. However, Father Martin explains that all the stories that came before the Jesus story “were simply a prologue to the Christians” (53). This explanation fails to appease Pi as he becomes increasingly frustrated with a god who is “too human” (55) in comparison with the gods of Hinduism who “rescue and save and put down evil” (55). This flashback to Pi’s formative years foreshadows the abandonment that he feels when his entire family perishes due to the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*. Surrounded by the flotsam and jetsam of the shipwreck Pi needed a God to rescue and save him. However, that God never materializes or engages in any supernatural act to provide some means of salvation.

Pi’s Hindu gods, who he associates “[w]ith shine and power and might” (Martel, 2001: 55) are markedly absent during the shipwreck. In Part 1 of the novel, Pi extols their might and power over the Son who is “a god on too human a scale” (55). He is disappointed in this god who consented to being “stripped naked, whipped, mocked, dragged through the streets” (54) and crucified. Pi compares this tainted God who died to atone for mankind’s collective sins only to be resurrected after three days to three Hindu gods: Krishna, whose mouth contains the whole universe; Vishnu, who fools Bali and takes possession of the earth, heavens, and netherworld with three steps; and Rama, “the most human of avatars” (55) whose strength and weapons ensured his victory over Ravana. These Hindu narratives shape Pi’s perception

of the Christian God as Christ does not epitomize any of the qualities or characteristics associated with Vishnu, Rama, or Ravana. Christ's story is one of an all-encompassing love for all mankind, irrespective of race, culture, or religion. Although Pi finds many flaws in Christ, he is still drawn to him and remarks that "the more [he] learned about Him, the less [he] wanted to leave Him" (57). The author-narrator, after spending an afternoon with Pi, evaluates Pi's religious philosophy as one that has a "realization that the founding principle of existence is what we call love" (63). Perhaps it is this realization that propels Pi to offer prayers to Christ, "who is alive" (58), and then run to the temple to thank Krishna for putting Jesus of Nazareth in his way. In this way he accomplishes an interfaith dialogue that surpasses that of the pandit, imam, and priest in its inclusionary vision. Martel's thematic concern with the interconnectedness of storytelling and faith is accomplished in Pi's interfaith dialogue. Pi, the Hindu/ Christian, continues on the road of his spiritual journey from Munnar back to his hometown where he encounters Mr. Satish Kumar, a Muslim baker who introduces him to Islam. This encounter connects the three hills of Munnar in Pi's religious landscape, three threads that coalesce in one being, Pi Patel.

Satish Kumar, "a Muslim mystic" (Martel, 2001: 61), introduces Pi to Sufism, a form of Islam, when he is fifteen years old. The Sufi's view of the world "as intimately connected to a Creator at the root of all things" (Wagner, 2016: 5) appeals to young Pi as his greatest hope is to achieve this intimate connection with God. Kumar, as "a hafiz" (Martel, 2001:61), guides Pi to another story, one about "the Beloved" (60). Stephens (2010: 54) draws attention to how the rituals of Islam "immediately feel natural" to Pi. Pi is deeply moved when he touches his forehead to the ground during prayer time at the mosque and this sensory experience can only be effectively illustrated through Pi's words: "Immediately it felt like a deeply religious contact" (Martel, 2001: 61). Pi does not embrace Islam for its wealth of stories or pantheon of gods like Hinduism, which are central features of Pi's self-identification as a Hindu. Islam, "a beautiful religion of brotherhood and devotion" (61), bridges the void that Pi feels in his quest for an intimate connection with God. The description of Mr. Kumar's hovel as a building that is more sacred than any temple, church, or mosque that Pi had visited evokes Martel's stated intention to reconceptualize one's belief in God and religion. Pi recounts how he "sometimes came out of that bakery feeling heavy with glory", a spiritual experience that is never replicated in either temple or church. His hunger for a complete union with God is realized when "[a]tman met Allah" (62), when his soul met God, and in the process epitomizes "Pi's version of the unified story of religion"

(Stephens, 2010: 54). Pi internalizes a multi-religious belief system that merges the different pathways into one path that leads to a universal God. This dichotomy of “unity and division” (Swanepoel, 2020: 6) is emphasized often in Pi’s narration of his spiritual metamorphosis. Martel mirrors this dichotomy in his arrangement of the embedded narratives of the novel. Although they consist of a series of nested narratives, Martel ensures that ‘literary unity’ is achieved through his juxtaposition of these frames. The chance meeting of Satish Kumar, Pi’s atheist biology teacher, and the other Satish Kumar, the man credited with introducing him to Islam, signifies a “unity of opposites” (Tsai, 2015: 100). The profound influence that these men have on shaping young Pi’s life is evidenced in the adult Pi’s decision to major in zoology and religious studies. In a chance encounter at the zoo in Pondicherry, the two Kumars bridge the chasm between science and religion in their united admiration of the Grant’s zebra. Mr. Kumar, the biology teacher, expresses his admiration in scientific terms by providing the scientific name for the zebra: “*Equus burchelli boehmi*” (Martel, 2001: 84). Mr. Kumar, the Sufi mystic, on the other hand, responds with “*Allahu akbar*” (84), extolling the greatness of God for this creation. The binary opposition of reason versus faith, is also embodied in this accidental meeting of teacher and baker. Tsai (2015: 100) points out that the believer and the rationalist “are ‘united’ in admiring the wondrousness of the animal”. As Mr. Kumar, the baker, quotes from the Holy Qur’an, “[i]n all this there are messages indeed for a people who use their reason” (Martel, 2001: 82). In *Life of Pi*, Pi uses “messages” (80) gleaned from religious narratives to understand and explain his traumatic experience and eventual survival.

The significance of religious narratives in Pi’s physical and psychological survival emerges as a narrative strategy in the embedded narrative frames that encapsulate his life story. The flashbacks and foreshadowing used in the narration of his tale, coupled with the story being told in Pi’s voice, creates an illusion of Pi being in control of the telling of his story to a large extent. However, it is the author-narrator who constructs the written version of Pi’s story. The significance of religious narratives in Pi’s story will, therefore, be examined through this lens. Pi’s references to these narratives at specific moments in the text are significant when evaluated against the castaway tale and the two versions presented to the Japanese officials. In one flashback, Pi recounts how a chance encounter at the zoo with his biology teacher, Mr. Kumar, leads to his initial exposure to atheism. During their conversation about the political state of India Pi declares that religion will save them. Kumar, however, mockingly refers to religion as “darkness” (Martel, 2001: 27) and proceeds to relate an event from his childhood

that convinced him that God does not exist. While bedridden with polio, Kumar constantly questioned where God was during his suffering, however, “God never came” (28). Pi, traumatized by this experience, is afraid that Kumar’s words would have the same effect of polio on him, that “it could kill God in a man” (28). However, he states that atheists like Mr. Kumar are his “brothers and sisters of a different faith” (28), unlike agnostics who annoy him with their doubt and lack of faith. A meditation on Christ’s experience of doubt in the Garden of Gethsemane illustrates Pi’s belief that everyone will “pass through the garden of Gethsemane” (28) at some stage of life and while doubt is acceptable during this episode, it must not be allowed to make one an emotional or psychological cripple. The adult Pi then offers a profound observation about the nature of doubt that prepares the reader for “The Pacific Ocean” section of his story: “[t]o choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation” (28). Pi and the author-narrator draw a parallel between God’s silence during Mr. Kumar’s bout with polio and Pi’s experience of God’s silence when he first realizes that he is a castaway. His cries of “Vishnu preserve me, Allah protect me, Christ save me” (98) are met with the same silence that Kumar experienced when cried out for salvation. When Pi proposes that if Christ wrestled with doubt and “spent an anguished night in prayer” (28) then it is permissible for anyone to express doubt, he is foreshadowing the doubt that he will be confronted with when he is left as the only human survivor of the shipwreck. Pi uses Christ’s outburst on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (28), to foreshadow his desperate appeal for salvation when he realizes that he is a castaway. It is only in retrospect that the reader will make this connection between Jesus on the cross and Pi, the castaway, who is being crucified on a watery cross. Pi uses this religious narrative to align his suffering with that of Christ, and to parallel how he also turns to God and experiences his own spiritual resurrection, in comparison to Mr. Kumar who abandons all belief in God. Martel’s illustration of Pi’s spiritual transcendence is conveyed through Pi’s correlation of his suffering with religion, faith, and belief.

The analogy between Pi and Jesus Christ is accentuated in Pi’s narration of his encounter with the pandit, priest and imam, and his encounter with Father Martin who introduces him to Christianity. On an outing with his parents his strange religious practices are exposed when they encounter “the three wise men” (Martel, 2001: 64). Pi compares the pandit, priest and imam to the three wise men who went to Bethlehem to worship and present gifts to the baby Jesus. In the traditional biblical narrative, after the wise men fell down and worshipped Jesus “they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh” (Matthew 2:11). In *Life of*

*Pi*, the pandit, priest and imam present Pi with the gifts of religion, each holding a specific significance for young Pi. The gold is generally viewed as a token that is given to royalty, while frankincense was an aromatic used as an offering during worship, and myrrh was used in perfumes and embalming oil. Comprehensively, these three symbols represent Christ's royalty, divinity, and suffering (Jamieson et al, 1871), and if they are applied to Pi then the gold can be viewed as a symbol that represents the golden domes of mosques, the frankincense as an act of worship in Hinduism, and myrrh as a symbol of Christ's suffering. In his narrative, Pi repeatedly emphasizes his inability to understand why Jesus had to suffer the most inhumane, demeaning torture and crucifixion to provide salvation for all of humanity. This focalization of Christ's suffering points to a deeper allusion of Pi's inability to understand his own suffering as an orphaned castaway. On the fourth day after the shipwreck, Martel draws another comparison between Pi's dilemma of ravenous thirst and that of Jesus on the cross when he was denied water. Pi states that if "thirst can be so taxing that even God incarnate complains about it, imagine the effect on a regular human" (Martel, 2001: 135). Stephens (2010: 51) suggests that Pi recounts "religious stories with which he is familiar to make sense of events that surpass his rational understanding during his ordeal at sea".

Shortly after the ship sinks, Pi imagines Ravi teasing him about whether he thinks that he is the biblical Noah because he has survived the shipwreck with a lifeboat filled with animals. Wagner (2016: 22) suggests that the biblical Noah allusion is "used to demonstrate the magnitude of God's power". However, Noah's flood narrative is a stark contrast to Pi's castaway tale as it represents a well-planned and executed destruction of what God perceives as evil and the preservation of a righteous group of people who would repopulate the earth. Pi, on the other hand, is the victim of a shipwreck, one that is not planned. He is not only the sole human survivor of the shipwreck, but also a captive on the lifeboat. In the biblical description of Noah's flood, God provided Noah with the blueprints for the ark, instructions that detailed the type and number of animals to take on board, and a guide as to how much of food would be required for the duration of the flood (Genesis 6-8). Pi, on the other hand, is traumatically flung from a sinking ship and soon finds himself surrounded by the flotsam and jetsam of the shipwreck. The Noah reference is perhaps a projection of hope that on the seventh day God will remember Pi and rescue him, just like how "God remembered Noah" (Genesis 8:01) and caused the waters to abate so that the ark eventually rested on dried ground. Another proposition that can be advanced is to view this interlude as evidence of Pi's

fracturing mind in the face of such devastation, one that clings to the familiar sarcasm that would normally accompany any of Ravi's scathing retorts. In one of the most evocative events in the novel, Pi realizes that he is surrounded by the vastness of sea and sky and simultaneously exhibits feelings of awe and terror. In an attempt to negotiate the terror, Pi draws a comparison between himself and Markandeya, the sage "who fell out of Vishnu's mouth while Vishnu was sleeping and so beheld the entire universe" (Martel, 2001: 177). While Markandeya is saved from dying of fear by Vishnu who puts him back into his mouth, none of the Gods in Pi's religious stories materialize to provide the salvation that he so desperately desires. Thorn (2015: 9) remarks that like the biblical "Job, Pi's faith does not disappear underneath the weight of his intense suffering". The detailed religious narratives that Martel weaves into Pi's account of devastation and despair exemplifies the novel's focus on the transformative and healing power of storytelling.

Forced to compromise his morality and kill a dorado to provide sustenance for Richard Parker, Pi relies yet again on his internal repository of religious stories to guide him. Chapter 61 of *Life of Pi* depicts an earlier incident when Pi attempts to kill one of the flying fish that had landed in the lifeboat, an incident that strips Pi of the last vestige of humanity that he has been clinging on to thus far. After killing the flying fish, Pi remarks that he "wept heartily over this poor little deceased soul" (Martel, 2001: 183) and that he still carries this burden as the adult Pi. His revelation that he still prays for this "first sentient being" (183) that he had killed conveys his guilt over this act, and not the subsequent of killing the dorado. After killing the dorado, Pi addresses the difficulty that may be experienced in attempting to understand how he can go from being distraught over the killing of the flying fish to "gleefully bludgeoning to death a dorado" (185). The explanation "is simple and brutal: a person can get used to anything, even to killing" (185). This statement signifies the potential for a greater evil that Martel hints at in Pi's alternate narrative, Pi's possible cannibalism to ensure his physical survival. Pi's exclamation of gratitude to Vishnu for taking on the form of a fish to save him from hunger and from being eaten by Richard Parker, exemplifies a restored faith and belief in divine intervention. The Vishnu who once "saved the world by taking the form of a fish" (185) symbolically leaps out of Pi's religious texts and becomes his salvation in the form of a fish. This intertextual overlay of the Christian salvation narrative over Pi's revisioning of the dorado as Vishnu's transmutation into a fish, is a clear example of Pi's merging of Christianity and Hinduism in a "form of religious syncretism" (Stephens, 2010: 53).

Martel utilizes a multipronged strategy in his engagement of religion as one of the major themes in the novel, one of which is the use of stories from the religious texts of Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. In an interview with Sabine Sielke (2003: 24), Martel reveals his belief that “God is a fiction” and the only way to access this fiction is “through the imagination” (25). The apparent opposition of reality versus imagination that he initiates from the *Author’s Note* is emphasized in Pi’s narration of his castaway tale. This is more specifically evidenced in Pi’s reliance upon religious narratives in response to the traumatic events that he is confronted with on the Pacific Ocean. In a world that resonates with God’s contraction from Pi and the resultant silence that he perceives, Pi uses his religious imagination to transform his stark castaway reality and suffering.

### **3.3. The limits of the [im]possible: Pi’s spiritual transcendence in a traumatic universe**

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.  
(Martel, 2001: 47)

In *Life of Pi*, Martel promotes a suspension of unbelief and challenges the reader’s capacity to have faith and accept ‘the better story’. Martel’s main protagonist, Pi Patel, establishes his philosophical perspective of the ‘better story’ from the first page of the “Toronto and Pondicherry” section of the novel: a story with God is the ‘better story’. Martel begins Pi’s castaway story with the adult Pi’s revelation that “the steady, mindful practice of religion slowly brought [him] back to life” (Martel, 2001: 3) from the abyss of suffering that he had emerged from as the sole survivor of the shipwreck. In a flashback to Pi’s childhood in Pondicherry, Martel gives the reader a glimpse into Pi’s religious worldview. Pi remarks that when people are born, they are generally “in limbo – without religion” (47) until they are introduced to God at some point of their human existence. However, “many people seem to lose God along life’s way” (47). Martel foregrounds the restorative and transformational

possibilities inherent in religion in Pi's simple statement: "That was not my case" (47). The apparent simplicity of this statement belies its implicit complexity as Pi is revealing that although he has suffered much tragedy, he has not lost "God along life's way" (47). Martel reveals this aspect of Pi's spirituality in the author-narrator intrusion that juxtaposes this chapter of the novel with its sensory details of religious artefacts representing Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam that are prominently featured in the adult Pi's house. Martel presents a spiritually transcended Pi through the lens of his author-narrator who, in this case, is both witness and scribe of Pi's tale. Merriam-Webster defines the word 'transcendence' as "the quality or state of being transcendent" ([s.a.]). One definition of 'transcendent', "extending or lying beyond the limits of ordinary experience" (Merriam-Webster, [s.a.]), provides the most effective description of Pi's spiritual transcendence in *Life of Pi*. In the novel, Pi uses various Christian allusions and stories in his narration. At one point he reveals that he could not get Christ out of his head, and "[s]till can't" (Martel, 2001: 57). Taking inspiration from Pi's elevation of the value of religious stories and the privileging of spirituality over religion, this section of Chapter Three offers an intertextual reading of Pi's spiritual transcendence. It takes as its focal point the parallels between Pi's journey and the biblical account of Job's suffering and ultimate renewal.

The Book of Job in the Christian bible is a type of survival narrative that shares some fascinating parallels with Pi's traumatic narrative. In both narratives, the main protagonist experiences the loss of family, is utterly isolated, and is afflicted with overwhelming spiritual suffering. However, in Job's story, he is set adrift on a metaphorical sea of trauma and devastation, in contrast to Pi Patel's castaway experience. Spiritual transcendence, however, is synonymous with Job's response to his calamity. Although he cannot understand why God is subjecting him to such great suffering and loss, he retains his faith and belief. Even when surrounded by voices of dissent and criticism, he refuses to abandon his faith and belief in his God. In the face of what others view as punishment and condemnation, he chooses obedience to God. How Pi rises above and goes beyond the limits of his traumatic experience is a type of "[t]hough He slay me, yet will I trust in Him" (Job 13:15) Job-like response to his situation. Smit-Marais (2012: 20), highlights the focus on spiritual transcendence in the novel and suggests that this strategy is deliberately employed to elevate "the redeeming and transformational potential of storytelling". Mill (2013) also emphasizes this in her suggestion that storytelling is used potentially as one way of representing Pi's traumatic experience. In

order to underline the intertextual overlaps between Pi's experience and the story of Job, a short outline of Job's story is provided below.

The Book of Job, an amalgamation of both prose and poetry, is also enclosed by a narrative frame that introduces the main protagonist's story. This frame, the prologue of the text, is written in prose, a form that is mirrored in the epilogue of the text. These prose sections form the frame around the poetic sections of the book. In the prologue, the narrator provides an account of how Job's affluent and blessed life is thrown into turmoil when Satan challenges God to remove the protection that he has placed around Job's life. Satan believes that if God removes his protection and provision then Job will reject God and will cease to worship him. However, the biblical God is a deity who unequivocally believes that his servant Job will not lose faith in him as his God, regardless of the loss of all his wealth, the death of all his children, and the attack on his body by a debilitating disease. God's defence is based on Job being "a perfect and upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil" (The Book of Job 1:8). Turnbloom (2009: 767) describes the resultant trial that Job must undertake as a test, designed by God, that sends him "on a spiritual journey which culminates in a face-to-face meeting with God". Job's spiritual transformation and emergence from the bowels of suffering is predicated upon a direct encounter with the creator, who appears to the suffering man in a whirlwind. Cernucan (2016) emphasizes this in his assertion to view Job's transformation as being dependent on the whirlwind encounter. In a series of rhetorical questions God reminds Job of His might and power. The focus on the natural world, especially the references to the behemoth and leviathan, two large beasts that are impervious to human control, demonstrates God's creative might and power to control. It is only when God addresses Job's accusations of His unjust actions toward him, that "Job immediately acknowledges his foolish speech and submits to God" (Cernucan, 2016: 272).

Job's admission of his limited knowledge of the ways of God and his willingness to "repent in dust and ashes" (The Book of Job 42:6) is honoured by God. God blesses the latter days of Job and restores his health, his wealth, blesses him with ten children, and grants him long life. Venter (2015: 1) argues that Job was "transformed by the principles unveiled by the Voice from within the storm". Pi's spiritual transformation in *Life of Pi*, is analogous to Job's narrative in many ways. Pi's story also features a storm that is a representation of the tangible presence of the divine. While Pi does not hear the voice of God like Job, he remembers this storm as "an outbreak of divinity" (Martel, 2001: 233). While Richard Parker cowers on the

floor of the lifeboat, Pi remarks that the “effect on [him] was completely the opposite” (233). This experience pulled him out of his “limited mortal ways and thrust [him] into a state of exalted wonder” (233). Although surrounded by an imminent threat of injury or death by lightning strike, this episode of his castaway experience is recounted as one of the few times during his ordeal when he felt “genuine happiness” (233). His outburst of praise to “Allah, Lord of All Worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Ruler of Judgement Day” (233) signals his belief that this is a divine act of communication from the God who appeared to have forsaken him when the ship sank, and he lost his family and possessions.

In the Book of Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, blame Job and his children for the calamities that Job experienced. According to Job’s friends, God must have punished Job because he must have displeased God in some way. Job, however, rebukes them and maintains his innocence in the face of God. When Job has a divine encounter with God when He appears to him in a whirlwind, God expresses his displeasure of the advice dispensed by the three friends and finds favour in Job. The faith and reverence that Job displays, especially after having questioned why God would allow the innocent and righteous to suffer, is honoured by God. The recompense for his faithfulness is a restoration of all that he lost when Satan set in motion the destruction and devastation that was designed to annihilate Job’s faith and belief in God. In *Life of Pi*, Pi acknowledges the influence of the pundit, priest, and imam on his spiritual transformation. On one fateful day, on the Goubert Salai esplanade, Pi’s parents discover the truth about their son’s multifaith belief in God. Pi is confronted by “the three wise men” (Martel, 2001: 64), as he calls them, and is compelled to make an exclusivist decision and follow one single religion. Consumed with religious fervour to protect what each view as religious truth, they attempt to convince Pi that it is impossible to have a simultaneous belief in three religions. The religious persecution that Pi is confronted with at the temple, mosque and church after this encounter does not weaken his resolve to pursue a multifaith belief in a universal God. Pi is harshly critical of religious fanatics who believe that God must be defended against any perceived slight levelled against Him. In this recollection of his religious journey during his teenage years, the adult, spiritually evolved Pi, emphasizes that God does not require defending as if He were “something weak and helpless” (70). The traumatic castaway experience has clearly informed his perception of God. From a spiritually illuminated point of view, Pi criticizes their inability to comprehend that “it is on the inside that God must be defended” (71). He maintains that “evil in the open is but evil from within that has been let out” (71). This reference to the human capacity for evil alludes to the

allegorical possibility that Richard Parker represents a psychological manifestation of a fractured mind. As Pi remarks to the Japanese investigators when he confesses to having murdered and cannibalized the cook, “he met evil in me – selfishness, anger, ruthlessness” (311). He remarks that he survives because he turned to God.

A view of Pi’s castaway experience through the lens of transcendence reveals a life transformed by events that should have destroyed him physically, psychologically, and spiritually. In Chapter 1, Pi begins his narration with a startling reference to some suffering that he has already endured. This account of Pi’s experience is irreducibly informed by tragedy and trauma from the beginning. It is only when the *Tsimtsum* sinks in Part 2 of the novel that the reader begins to comprehend the ‘true’ nature of the suffering that Pi has briefly gestured towards in the first line of his embedded narrative. In Part 3, the reader is confronted with two accounts of his survival: one story with animals, very much like the account given to the author-narrator, and one in which all the survivors are human. The human version is an intensely graphic account that infers Pi’s possible acts of cannibalism: an ultimate transgression that violates religious and moral injunctions and relegates a human being to a sub-human status. His tenacious hold on his “strange religious practices” (Martel, 2001: 3), as evidenced in his choice of majors for his bachelor’s degree, point to Pi’s spiritual transcendence when examined retrospectively. Pi reveals two important factors that can be ascribed as a justification for the proposition that Pi has managed to integrate the debilitating horrors of the real through a spiritually mediated transcendence. Firstly, the focus on “certain aspects of the cosmogony theory of Isaac Luria” (3) in his religious studies thesis reveals a transcendental interest in a mystical branch of Judaism. He does not elucidate which aspect of Luria’s theory formed the focus of the thesis. However, the adult Pi does reveal that he has explored the teachings of a specific sect of Judaism in his multifaith approach to worshipping God and has written a thesis on Luria’s theory. Secondly, the scientific focus on the “functional analysis of the thyroid gland of the three-toed sloth...because their calm, quiet and introspective” (3) demeanour soothed his “shattered self” (3) infers a possible alignment with his religious beliefs. Pi’s perspective of the three-toed sloth as “a beautiful example of the miracle of life” (5) that reminds him of God, can be read as a survival metaphor. This proposition is highlighted by Stephens (2010: 50) who suggests that the three-toed sloths remind Pi of God “because of its miraculous capacity to survive”. Pi’s fascination with the three-toed sloths is a possible identification with the characteristics of this animal, especially its capacity to survive in the wild even when surrounded by predators like “jaguars, ocelots,

harpy eagles and anacondas” (Martel, 2001: 4). The focus of the study is on the thyroid gland of the sloth, the organ that regulates the metabolism of the animal. This is suggestive of Pi’s intrigue with the reason for the animal’s “indolence” (3). Examined from this perspective, another proposition that can be considered here is the possibility that he views the three-toed sloths as a type of symbol for the God of his multifaith universe, a reconciliation of religion and science in a mystical connection with Luria’s cosmogony theory.

In Cosmogony theory, Luria proposes that “the infinite God, Eyn Sof, had to withdraw, to contract into itself to make a place for that which is not divine” (Cherry, 2011: 320). God’s divinity, however, is still present in the world as a trace that is left behind, and “[a]lthough incapable of initiating independent action, the divine presence is nevertheless the ongoing source of all vitality” (320). Perhaps it is the sloth’s ability to contract within itself in its protracted periods of rest, blending into the environment while still a physically tangible presence, that Pi relates to God’s contraction in the traumatic event that claims the lives of his entire family. *Tsimtsum* is the term Luria uses for God’s exile. Przemyslaw (2019: 115) states that “Luria’s concept of *tzimtzum* explains the preliminary stage of Creation in which the primordial, undifferentiated pleroma of Divine light (or, more precisely Ein-Sof) must transform to make room for creation”. The structure of Luria’s system consists of “two movements” (115): contraction and creation. Stratton (2004) draws attention to Martel’s naming of the *Tsimtsum*, the ship that transports the Patel family to Canada, as an intentional strategy that he associates with Pi’s choice of topic for his Religious Studies thesis. When the *Tsimtsum* sinks and his family drowns in this tragedy, he experiences *tsimtsum*, a withdrawal of the divine and the physical presence of family and shelter. The very foundation of Pi’s multifaith spiritual beliefs are shaken when the ship sinks with “a monstrous, metallic burp” (Martel, 2001: 97), thrusting him into a state of exile from all that is synonymous with the familiar and with a human concept of safety and security. At the same time Martel creates a new reality for Pi: the world of the castaway.

In *Life of Pi*, Pi’s story is essentially one of suffering and a protracted battle to survive unspeakable horrors as a castaway. Part 1 of the novel reveals the suffering that Pi endures as child who becomes a victim of bullying in primary school. In another echo of Job’s story, Satan is also presented as an accuser of the righteous, and in Pi’s case he symbolizes the voices of the children who bastardize his name. Piscine Patel, a name synonymous with a famous French swimming pool, is reduced to the shameful “Pissing Patel” (Martel, 2001: 20),

a reminder of Pi's irreducible humanity. Feeling like a "persecuted prophet Muhammad in Mecca" (21) who is planning his escape to Medina, he resolves that this hell would not be his reality in secondary school. He sets in motion a plan "to put down Satan" (22). The recounting of this episode of his life is an early demonstration of Pi's skill in rewriting his story and reinscribing the meaning of his narrative. The conditioning of the minds of the teachers and pupils of Petit Séminaire to refer to him as Pi Patel demonstrates the novel's conflation of survival and spiritual transcendence. Swanepoel (2020: 6) provides some enlightenment on this aspect of the novel when she remarks on the similarities between Pi presenting two versions of one story and his successful renaming, thus resulting in him becoming "the one boy with two names". She maintains that the "idea of the self splitting into two through a story for the sake of survival links to themes related to spirituality in the book" (6). Her proposition reveals a link between Pi's multifaith perspective of God and the dichotomy between the names ascribed to things and what they are in reality. What emerges in this renaming episode is Martel's emphasis on the limitations of language when it comes to describing the conditions of reality. It demonstrates how language itself can be insufficient to describe the complexity of the 'unnameable' traumas experienced by Pi. Swanepoel (2020) also foregrounds another important instance of renaming that occurs in the novel. Pi's renaming of himself in the second story indicates the splitting of the self into two disparate aspects of Pi's traumatized and fractured new composite identity. As a mechanism of survival Pi constructs the animal Other to cope with the reality of cannibalism. If this reality is accepted as Pi's 'truth', then the adult Pi is a morally exalted human who has negotiated and overcome the physical and psychological impact of cannibalism. Thorn (2015: 2), for example, asserts that the scene with the blind Frenchman "reveals the cannibalism that Pi cannot admit". Pi, on the other hand, ascribes the killing of the Frenchman to Richard Parker. Pi recounts how Richard Parker "ripped the flesh off the man's frame and cracked his bones" (255). However, in a gruesome twist, Pi reveals that due to an ever-present hunger and "the madness to which it pushed [him]" (255), he succumbs and partakes of the man's flesh.

Hunger, one of the major themes in the novel, correlates with the spiritual and moral transformation that the adult Pi reveals in his narration. The author-narrator, during one of the interview sessions with the adult Pi observes that his pantry is "[a] reserve of food to last the siege of Leningrad" (Martel, 2001: 25). The deprivation that Pi experienced as a castaway, especially in relation to constant hunger and thirst, translates into a borderline irrational preoccupation with food and readiness for disaster. It also signifies a person who has been

irreducibly transformed by his experience of trauma. In the first chapter of Pi's embedded narrative, the adult Pi reveals that Richard Parker has stayed with him as a lingering trace of trauma. However, he features in "nightmares mostly" (6). The author-narrator's observation that "Richard Parker still preys on his mind" (42) reflects a psychological response to his animal Other, a constant reminder of what he must never revert to. As the fictional writer states in the last author-narrator intrusion, "[t]his story has a happy ending" (93). This statement epitomizes Pi Patel's transformation from moral depravity to a semblance of normal suburban existence, the life that his parents hoped to forge in Canada.

During the castaway period of his sea journey Pi must "put down Satan" (Martel, 2001: 22) many times to ensure his survival. This Satan is not the evil spiritual force of the Job story, but the forces of despair and hopelessness that war within Pi. The daily battle to secure food and water is juxtaposed with the human functioning of the body. At some point Pi's clothes disintegrate and the daily contact with saltwater results in his body being covered in "red, angry, disfiguring" (192) boils. In the Job story, Satan is appalled at Job's reaction to the news of the loss of his possessions and children. Job's decision to shave his head, fall down to the ground and worship God, is not the outcome that Satan predicted. He requests permission to afflict Job further, and when granted permission to do so, he "smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown" (Job 2: 7). When Job's wife incites him to "curse God, and die" (Job 2: 9), he rebukes her and refuses to sin in this way. Pi reflects the same philosophy when confronted with an uncertain future, naked and covered in painful boils. As an adult, Pi makes a statement that is heavily loaded with a possible allusion to his transformation: "[m]y skin healed, though I have scars on my shoulders and back" (Martel, 2001:7). The healing of his skin symbolizes not only a physical healing, but also a spiritual and psychological healing. The scars, however, are a physical reminder of the traumatic, horrific chain of events that almost destroyed him physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually.

Thorn (2015) points out the similarity between Job's suffering and the suffering endured by Pi as the sole survivor of the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*. Thorn (2015: 9) refutes Duncan's (2008) claim of "the existential nature of the lifeboat segment as being uninformed by Pi's religious backstory" by drawing attention to "existential themes of suffering and despair" in the religious texts of Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. As a multifaith proponent, Pi has been exposed to many stories of suffering that can be gleaned from these religious texts. One

proposition advanced by Swanepoel (2020) is to conceptualize *Life of Pi* as a novel that foregrounds spirituality as a crucial factor that contributes to the survival of the human spirit when tested in the fire of trauma. From the frame narrative of the novel, Martel engages with the elevation of spirituality over religion. Pi epitomizes Martel's valorization of the spiritual above the religious.

Like Job, Pi's faith is tested through a series of traumatic events. "The ship sank" (Martel, 2001: 97) signals the beginning of sorrows for Pi Patel. The happy, upbeat, and somewhat idealized rendition of his childhood years is supplanted by unspeakable horrors that he is confronted with when the *Tsimtsum* sinks. The plaintive declaration, "I was alone and orphaned, in the middle of the Pacific, hanging onto an oar, an adult tiger in front of me, sharks beneath me, a storm raging about me" (107), exemplifies Pi's tremendous loss and resultant despair. However, as Thorn (2015: 9) points out, "like Job, Pi's faith does not disappear underneath the weight of his intense suffering". There are many allusions to this proposition in the novel. Martel provides a glimpse of this in Chapter 73 where Pi reveals his hunger for spiritual connection. He reveals that his greatest wish was to have a book with a never-ending story that he could repeatedly read to gain "a fresh understanding each time" (Martel, 2001: 207). However, "there was no scripture in the lifeboat" (207). His intensely emotional reaction of bursting into tears when discovering a Bible in a hotel room in Canada for the first time, and his appeal to the Gideons to expand their field of influence in spreading "sacred writings" (208), is indicative of Martel's sustained signposting of the moral and spiritual transcendence of his main protagonist. In this short chapter, Pi's faithfulness to God, even after having endured the tragic circumstances of the shipwreck, is juxtaposed against his reference to having access to only a survival manual on the lifeboat and trying "to capture a reality that overwhelmed" (280) him in a diary. Dismissing the importance of the contents of the diary as "[w]ords scratched on a page ... very practical stuff" (208), overlays a deeper, more profound message. Martel provides a glimpse into the intimate details that Pi recorded in the diary comprising "[s]everal days, several weeks, all on one page" (208). This written record of the despair and fight for survival reflects the beginning of an even greater period of suffering that could have eroded Pi's faith in God.

Smit-Marais (2012: 153) suggests that Pi's narration "situates him as a symbol of endurance and transcendence". A reconciliation of the narration of his survival, as recounted to the author-narrator, with the two accounts presented to the Japanese officials in the interview

transcript, highlights the novel's engagement with the transformative power of storytelling as a mechanism for representing Pi's psychological survival. The presentation of two divergent stories to Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba, one that resembles the version recounted to the author-narrator, and one that is horrific in its graphic account of cannibalism, reveals Martel's authorial intention for the privileging of the 'better story' over the truth. This is conveyed not only through Pi's appeal to the officials to choose "the better story" (Martel, 2001: 317), but also through the author-narrator's assertion that Pi's story is indeed one that will make the reader believe in God. However, this strategy also powerfully conveys Pi's spiritual and moral transcendence, especially when explored against the backdrop of the embedded narrative frame that encapsulates his account of the traumatic events that he has survived.

Smit-Marais (2012: 140) states that the 'truth' has been fictionalized to ensure his psychological survival, thus resulting in Pi emerging as "a spiritually tested but exalted human being". The spiritually tested and exalted Pi is presented to the reader in Part 1 of the novel by both Pi, the oral narrator of the story, and the author-narrator, who is responsible for the written version of Pi's tale. This ambivalent depiction of 'truth' is underlined by in the author-narrator intrusions, presented as notes of observations made during his interview sessions with the adult Pi. In the fifth metadiegetic author-narrator insertion, the fictitious writer encapsulates Pi's exalted moral and spiritual transformation in the note that he writes after an interview session with the adult Pi. The interview has such a profound effect on the writer that he notes the following:

Words of divine consciousness: moral exaltation; lasting feelings of elevation, elation, joy; a quickening of the moral sense, which strikes one as more important than an intellectual understanding of things; an alignment of the universe along moral lines, not intellectual ones; a realization that the founding principle of existence is what we call love, which works itself out sometimes not clearly, not cleanly, not immediately, nonetheless ineluctably. (Martel, 2001: 63)

These observations are made in relation to the adult Pi who has yet to reveal the great suffering that he has been subjected to, and that has mediated his moral and spiritual transcendence over his traumatic experiences. The Martel-like fictional author's notes are strategically nestled in the embedded narratives that enclose Pi's life story and castaway tale. The author-narrator intrusions provide the foundation for Martel's establishment of Pi as a

spiritually and morally transcended human being. However, Martel does not reveal the grounds for this transformation at this point of the story. At the end of the novel readers are challenged to revisit chapters like Chapter 21 where the author-narrator extols Pi's "[w]ords of divine consciousness: moral exaltation; lasting feelings of elevation...a quickening of the moral sense, which strikes one as more important than an intellectual understanding of things" (Martel, 2001: 63).

Martel challenges the reader to accept one of the two stories as Pi's 'truth', and while many critics may argue that the story with animals reflects a spiritually and morally transformed life, it can also be equally true if evaluated against the second story. The story with human beings is more challenging to accept as Pi's possible cannibalism must be evaluated through the lens of transcendence. A retrospective analysis of Pi's double narrative that he presents to the Japanese officials challenges the reader's perception of Pi's harrowing tale as presented in "The Pacific Ocean" frame. The second version of his survival story raises the possibility that Pi became a cannibal to physically survive the ordeal, going against his spiritual beliefs and vegetarian lifestyle. In a heart wrenching revelation, Pi attempts to describe the reality that he faced daily on the lifeboat: "[p]hysically it is extraordinarily arduous, and morally it is killing" (Martel, 2001: 217). Pi's faith in God should have been decimated in view of the moral degradation that becomes increasingly apparent in his account. Marais (2018: 9) suggests that "religion and spirituality become the means of Pi's existential survival". Like Job, Pi is presented as a survivor of a horror that is unimaginable, yet the resultant effect of this trial is not the destruction of the soul, but a transcendence that testifies to the ability of the human soul to rise above physical, spiritual, and psychological trauma. The Book of Job emphasizes "the extremely complex relation between God and the suffering of the righteous" (Schmidt & Nel, 2003: 79). In *Life of Pi*, Martel's engagement with this aspect of faith is exemplified in Pi Patel's spiritual and moral journey in the novel. Throughout the novel the reader is confronted with a protagonist who intricately conveys his attempts to forge a new understanding of God and his workings in an individual's life.

## Chapter Four

### **Tigers and Trauma: Reading Pi's conflicting narratives as a response to trauma**

In *Life of Pi*, Martel constantly blurs the line between fact and fiction. His metafictional novel challenges a willing suspension of disbelief and requires the reader to take a leap of faith and believe what he endorses as a 'better story'. The dissertation has, thus far, extensively explored, and analyzed this pivotal aspect of the novel. In this chapter of the dissertation, I examine the two versions of Pi's castaway story that he recounts during the interview with Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba. In Part 3: "Benito Juárez Infirmary, Tomatlán, Mexico" the author-narrator presents a written version of the taped conversation in the form of an interview transcript. I argue that Pi's disparate narratives defy a general classification of allegory and propose that they should, instead, be read as two stories. Trauma theory will form the theoretical foundation for this reading of Pi's conflicting narratives as a complex, figurative response to the overwhelming exigencies of traumatic experience. An outline of trauma theory and its relevance to literary criticism is provided in the Theoretical Framework section of Chapter One of this dissertation and these formulations will be elucidated in Chapter Four. In Chapter Four, I also explore the relationship between memory and storytelling in Martel's fictional universe, highlighting how Martel's palimpsestic overlaying of 'real' experiences with fictitious reworkings of these experiences refashions and problematizes simplistic notions of narrative veracity. I conclude this chapter with an exploration of the symbolic connotation of the Richard Parker/Moccasin dichotomy and analyze its potential for meaningfully deconstructing Pi's 'truth' in *Life of Pi*.

#### **4.1. Traumatic Stories – Parallel narratives and *Life of Pi***

Martel's use of analepsis in *Life of Pi* has a profound impact on the narration of Pi's story. In Part 1/ "Toronto and Pondicherry", it is used to signify a traumatic event that has occurred in Pi Patel's past. These flashbacks, coupled with interwoven observations of Pi's present life that the author-narrator records in the form of notes, reveal a life that has been spiritually and morally transformed. However, this is overtly evident from the outset. Pi's profound

transformation only becomes apparent in a retrospective analysis of the novel. This chapter of the dissertation focuses on the third embedded frame of the novel, the interview transcript that encloses the two disparate accounts Pi presents to the Japanese officials at the Benito Juárez Infirmary. These officials were instructed by “the Maritime Department in the Japanese Ministry Transport” (Martel, 2001: 289) to interview “the lone survivor of the Japanese ship Tsimtsum” (289). The rationale informing these interviews is to determine whether Pi could offer some useful insights concerning the underlying cause of the shipwreck. While the first account appears analogous to the epic survival narrative Pi narrated in the embedded frame preceding the interview transcript, the second story consists of desperate human survivors driven by the imperative of survival replete with vicious infighting, murder and cannibalism. In both stories Pi emerges as the sole survivor of the shipwreck. However, it appears that Pi has not revealed the second story to the author-narrator who has thus far been providing a written account of Pi’s traumatic castaway experience. Stratton (2004: 17) suggests that Pi presents the first story to the author-narrator approximately twenty years later because of “the traumatic nature of his experience”. This highlights the possibility of embellishment in Pi’s narrative which could obscure the horrific truth of what really transpired during the 227 days at sea. This section of Chapter Four explores the two narratives as two distinct (though interrelated) narrative responses to Pi’s trauma. It also examines the impact of trauma on Pi against the landscape of ‘the better story’ that he has chosen as his ‘truth’.

Trauma theory’s significance in literary studies is elucidated by Hartman (1995) in “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies”. Hartman (1995: 537) states that trauma theory focuses “on the relationship of words and trauma...helping us to ‘read the wound’ with the aid of literature”. However, to gain a clear understanding of trauma theory “we need to ask what exactly is understood by trauma” (Visser, 2011: 271). According to Caruth (1991: 181) trauma is generally understood as “an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena”. In an exploration of traumatic experience, Caruth (1996: 3) provides a twofold definition of trauma: firstly, “the Greek trauma, or ‘wound’, originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body”, and secondly, “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind”. The symbolic, literary incarnation of the ‘wound’ referred to by Hartmann (1995) can be more clearly understood when examined in conjunction with this definition of trauma. In *Life of Pi*, Pi emerges as the

survivor of a shipwreck whose trauma manifests both physically - because of exposure to the natural elements of the Pacific Ocean - and psychologically - because of the horrors that he experiences as a castaway. However, Pi's trauma cannot be conceptualized within the narrow confines of this twofold perspective. In her article on trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies, Visser (2011) provides a more nuanced definition of trauma that is arguably more commensurate with Pi's narrative(s). Visser (2011: 272) suggests that trauma "refers not so much to the traumatic event as to the traumatic aftermath, the post traumatic stage". In *Life of Pi* the traumatic event is the shipwreck that orphans Pi Patel and leaves him stranded on a lifeboat for 227 days. In *Life of Pi*, this 'post traumatic stage' is embodied in Martel's elaborate narrative juxtapositions which provide an interpretive lens through which the reader can witness the traumatic events that Pi has survived.

Scherzinger and Mill (2013) analyze the complexity of Pi's trauma in a nuanced and fascinating examination of the novel. The writers argue that "Pi's trauma cannot be represented unequivocally or reflected without distortion" (64). These critics emphasize the ultimate impossibility of identifying a seamless correlation between the animal and the human versions of Pi's maritime odyssey. Scherzinger and Mill (2013: 64) contend that "to take refuge in allegory as an uncomplicated explanation for the double narrative seems unsatisfactory considering the numerous ambiguities that arise between the two stories". Morse (2013: 2) argues that, in response to the officials' frustration and apparent disbelief, "Pi tells the men a second, reasonable story, allegorically substituting the animals for people". However, to classify *Life of Pi* as an uncomplicated allegory, the novel must exhibit a narration of "one coherent set of circumstances which are intended to signify a second order of correlated meanings" (Abrams and Harpham, 2005: 7). *Life of Pi*, however, repeatedly subverts obvious allegorical correlations between the two stories. When attempting to correlate the two tales, the horrified Mr Chiba reveals the possibility that in this allegorical substitution Pi is "the tiger" (Martel, 2001: 311). Although the Japanese officials attempt to formulate an allegorical interrelationship between the stories, they also inadvertently identify the significant gaps and inconsistencies between the stories. Faced with the horror of interviewing a possible cannibal, they try to make sense of the disparities: the blind Frenchman, algae island, the meerkat bones, the human teeth. Scherzinger and Mill (2013) suggest an alternate possibility. The critics suggest that "[i]n the allegory, the 'original' story is lost (as the moment of Pi's trauma is lost) and all we have are two stories to consider" (64).

In the BBC News (2002: n.p.) live forum, one of the participants expressed his surprise regarding Martel's comment that "there is nothing allegorical about the book". The interpretive inscrutability concomitant with the presentation of two discrete and 'unlinked' stories is reflected in Martel's response:

I think in this novel there are two stories. An allegory implies that something is referring to something else. Now you can take it as an allegory but that's a choice that the reader makes. My view of it is that there are two stories and the reader has to decide which to believe. So I suppose the one that you believe is the true story and the other can be interpreted as allegory. But since neither one is necessarily true or necessarily false, both can be true. So I don't think of it as an allegory nor do I think of it as a fable. I think of it as two stories and you have to choose. (BBC News, n.p.)

Martel's response to Sabine Sielke's (2003: 13) interrogation regarding "the apparent simplicity of *Life of Pi*" contributes to the broader debate on whether the novel should be regarded as an allegory. Martel reveals that "stylistically the book is simple" (Sielke, 2003: 14). The two stories are "parallel stories, but parallel still means two lines" (14). Martel, however, warns against being deceived by the presumed simplicity of the novel. The author states that at some point the reader will "realize that with these simple strokes" he is "creating a more complex picture" (14). Taking my cue from these revelations by novel's author, Pi's divergent representations of his castaway tale during the interview will be explored as two distinct stories that attempt to articulate Pi's trauma. To this end, the dissertation acknowledges Pi as a fictional construct, a character in Martel's bildungsroman. As Scherzinger and Mill (2013: 65) note, "fictional trauma cannot be simply correlated with real trauma".

Pi's trauma is an elusive spectre that materializes and dissipates at will in Part 1 of the novel. Trauma is represented as some great "suffering" (Martel, 2001: 3) that the adult Pi experienced at an earlier period of his life. Its appearance is controlled by Pi as the narrating "I", and the author-narrator as the scribe who renders the written version of the story. Greenburg (2007) highlights two complications that arise when this writing strategy is employed. Firstly, "[a]ny act of telling the story of another involves translation, loss and interpretation" (Greenburg, 2007: 356). Secondly, "stories of trauma expand the layers of inaccessibility" (356). Martel's choice to present Pi's tale in the first-person imbues the

telling of the story with a strong sense of verisimilitude. However, his doppelgänger author-narrator (who constructs the story from notes that he compiles during his conversation with Adirubasamy, and the interviews with Pi Patel in Toronto) adds another layer to the novel's unreliable texture.

In previous chapters of the dissertation, the unreliability of the narration of Pi's story by both Pi and the author-narrator has been extensively explored and emphasized. Pi's narration in Part 1 of the novel is disrupted by author-narrator intrusions in the form of notes that are recorded during his interviews with the adult Pi. The absence of disruptions by the author-narrator in Part 2: "The Pacific Ocean" therefore casts suspicion on Pi's narration of the castaway period of his life. Although the castaway story is told in Pi's voice, the written version (in the form of the novel) is written by the author-narrator. The interview transcript, however, marks the return of the interjecting author-narrator. Martel reminds the reader of the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy at play in the novel by juxtaposing this frame with "The Pacific Ocean" embedded frame. This narrative strategy is intended to engender a sense of verisimilitude. However, the author-narrator states that the written transcription of the three-hour interview consists of "excerpts from the verbatim transcript" (Martel, 2001: 290). Furthermore, he confesses that the portions of text written in a different font were translated from Japanese to English. This problematizes the willing suspension of disbelief that the novel valorizes and emphasizes the gap created between the translation and transmission of the interview transcript. Newman (1986: 143) describes this type of storytelling as "a form of seduction". She states that spoken narratives that are transcribed in writing by another narrator "cast[s] suspicion... on the medium through which their tellers pursue their aims of seduction – the speaking voice" (144).

The selective transformation of Pi's story is highlighted in the "excerpts" (Martel, 2001: 290) that the author-narrator has chosen to reveal to the reader. This casts further suspicion on the "verbatim" (290) aspect of the transcript. Mill (2013: 64) proposes that "[t]he position of the Japanese official's frame within the novel is strategic to the unfolding of the novel". The question that arises at the edge of this frame concerns the possible obfuscation that the author-narrator may be engaged in at the tail end of Pi's remarkable tale. Why does he include only "excerpts" (Martel, 2001: 290) from a three-hour interview? The word "verbatim" (290) infers a literal word-for-word record of the interview, so the inclusion of portions of the interview is highly suspicious. Martel emphasizes the truth/fiction binary

opposition in this play on words and establishes the unreliability of the medium through which Pi's disparate tales are conveyed. Furthermore, the interview can be construed as a type of testimony that the Japanese officials require from Pi as witness of the shipwreck. Felman's (1992: 5) definition of "[t]o testify" (5) is perhaps most relevant at this point: "to vow to tell, to promise and produce one's own speech as material evidence for truth – is to accomplish a *speech act*". Pi's "Yes. I'd be happy to" (Martel, 2001: 291) in response to Okamoto's request for a detailed account marks the beginning of his testimony. Okamoto's expectation is that Pi will produce "material evidence" (Felman, 1992: 5), the 'truth' of what transpired on the Pacific Ocean. However, Chapter 97 - which is positioned immediately after this remark - consists of two words: "The story" (291). The author-narrator expects the reader to assume that Pi recounted the same animal version of his castaway tale that was related in Part 2 of the novel.

Pi's presentation of the animal version of his castaway tale to the Japanese officials as "[t]he story" (Martel, 2001: 291) is met with disbelief. As agents of reason and rationality they identify aspects of the story that defy credulity. The island of floating bananas does not "hold up" (292) to their scientific scrutiny. The algae island "contradict[s] the laws of nature" (294). Richard Parker is "just too hard to believe" (297). Pi's first account is like the cookies that the officials procure for him, "good but [it] tend[s] to crumble" (292). The officials also use food to elicit the responses that they want to hear from Pi but fail to note his detachment from the traumatic events being related. When Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba initially meet Pi, his response to their greeting is measured, calm and cordial. He even enquires as to whether they had "a good trip" (291). Mr. Okamoto assures Pi that they "had a wonderful trip" (291). However, this is a lie as they initially went to Tomatán, Baja California, instead of Tomatlán, Jalisco, and their rental car broke down on the way to the infirmary. When they arrived at Tomatlán, they had travelled "non-stop for forty-one hours" (290) and were extremely tired. Before Okamoto initiates a conversation about Pi's sea odyssey, Pi reveals that he "had a terrible trip" (291). This is somewhat casual remark belies the horrific events that Pi survived as a castaway, just as the officials' "good trip" (291) infers that nothing untoward had occurred. When the officials refuse to believe the fantastical account that is presented as the animal story, Pi has an emotional breakdown. The initial calm demeanour is replaced by anger and frustration. Mr. Okamoto's appeal to Pi to "please calm down" (297) has the opposite effect. Pi's fiery response to their unbelief is symptomatic of someone being compelled to confront their trauma. Underlying the apparent desperation evident in Pi's

response to Okamoto's appeal for the truth is a tangible fear of some unseen threat. Mr. Okamoto reveals a possible source of Pi's fear: fear of facing "criminal charges" (198) for what transpired on the Pacific Ocean. In the animal version that he relates to the author-narrator, Pi states that when faced with "your mortal end" (162) fear "nestles in your memory like a gangrene" (162) and seeks to rot "even the words with which to speak of it" (162). According to Pi, words are the only weapon that can defeat fear and so his admonition is to "fight hard to express it" (162), and "fight hard to shine the light of words upon it" (162). If fear is not fought and defeated, it "becomes a wordless darkness that you avoid" (162). When pressed to tell the officials "what really happened" (302), Pi "shine[s] the light of words upon it" (162). Pi's construction of fictional alternatives reflects Martel's professed belief in the transformative powers of storytelling.

According to Stratton (2004: 17) Pi's first story "provide[s] a means of coping with trauma". Stratton (2004: 17) believes that it also "offer[s] a defence against traumatic reality". While Pi's reaction to the officials' disbelief clearly reflects a desperation for the first story to be validated, it also provides a glimpse of a fractured, traumatized psyche. He draws on his vast knowledge of animals and animal behaviour to provide a defence against the scepticism of the officials. However, the mastery over Richard Parker, achieved using skills he picked up having grown up at a zoo, is viewed as a virtual impossibility. The officials refuse to believe that it is possible to co-exist with a grown Bengal tiger within the confines of a lifeboat for 227 days. Stratton (2004: 15) refers to Pi's visit to the algae island, another fantastical construction, as "quite incomprehensible unless it is read retrospectively, with reference to Pi's second story". Mr. Okamoto's request for a rational story, "a story without animals" (Martel, 2001: 303), is fulfilled when Pi reveals a second story. However, there is a "long silence" (303) between Okamoto's request and the second story. Janes (2013: 121) proposes that an interpretation of this second story "hinges on whether we read this as a pause for recollection or for invention".

The second story is also an intricately woven tapestry. However, the officials' expectation of hearing a more reasonable account is crushed. Pi relates how the cook cuts off the Taiwanese sailor's leg on the pretext that it had to be done as the leg was rotting. However, Pi and his mother soon realize that the cook had fabricated this excuse to cut off the leg. Although they attempt to nurse the sailor and make him comfortable, he dies and to their horror the cook eats his flesh. He does not stop there and soon Pi's mother is brutally butchered and her flesh

consumed as well. Pi relates his own moral descent when he states that when he killed the evil cook “he met evil in me” (Martel, 2001: 311). Mr. Chiba’s reaction encapsulates Pi’s possible reluctance to reveal this story first: “What a horrible story” (311). The switch from English to Japanese in their conversation about the “horrible story” (311) masks their shock and revulsion and allows them to process their secondary trauma. Okamoto then attempts to accurately reconcile the parallel stories that they have elicited from Pi and concludes that “[h]is stories match” (311).

Chiba summarizes the parallel correlations between the two versions of Pi’s castaway tale as follows: “So the Taiwanese sailor is the zebra, his mother is the orang-utan, the cook is ...the hyena – which means he’s the tiger!” (311). Okamoto has to sadly concede that “[t]he tiger killed the hyena – and the blind Frenchman – just as he killed the cook” (311). This allegorical comparison raises the possibility that the second story is the ‘truth’, and that Pi reimagined this story as a spectacular epic filled with animals to creatively transform his horrifying memories and protect his shattered psyche. However, the allegorical approach creates interpretive discrepancies between the two stories. Algae island is not depicted in the human version of Pi’s castaway story. According to Pi, the cook insisted that they would find an island. However, Pi and his mother “exhausted [their] eyes scanning the horizon for an island that never came” (309). The blind Frenchman, who Pi encounters near the conclusion of his sea odyssey, appears to be another version of the evil French cook who killed Pi’s mother. Pi insists that there were meerkat bones in the lifeboat. However, in the human version he does not include the algae island episode so how is it possible that these bones ended up on the boat? Scherzinger and Mill (2013: 57) point out the “unsettling asymmetry suggested by the hyena/cook/Frenchman equation”. The writers contend that the algae island episode and the identity of the meerkats present a conundrum that cannot be resolved.

The gaps created between the two versions emphasize the possibility of interpreting the second account as the true account. Perhaps it is in these gaps that we encounter “the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (Caruth, 1996: 4). The juxtaposition of two specific episodes in Pi’s account of his survival demonstrates this possibility: the encounter with the blind Frenchman and the algae island episode. Pi encounters the Frenchman at a point in the novel when he has given up on life up on life and decided to “leave matters in the hands of God” (Martel, 2001: 242). There are many parallels between Pi’s description of the French cook who survived the

shipwreck and the blind Frenchman he encounters during an episode of blindness. The Frenchman exhibits the same gluttony that the evil cook demonstrates when he secretly eats the supplies that were supplied in the lifeboat. However, there is one other aspect of Pi's conversation with the Frenchman that reveals the possibility that this episode is a manifestation of his fractured mind. When the Frenchman speaks about eating organs like tripe, sweetbread (pancreas), and calf brains, Pi becomes physically ill. Pi then enquires as to whether the man is amenable to eating "bleeding raw beef... the congealed blood of a dead pig...*anything* from an animal, the last remains?" (245). In the second story that he relates to the officials, Pi gives a detailed account of how he cut out the cook's heart and devoured it. He reveals that the heart "tasted delicious, far better than turtle" (311). He then eats the cook's liver and feasts on his flesh. The parallels between the Frenchman and Pi cannot be ignored as it could be interpreted as Pi's creative reworking of (and attempt to psychologically integrate) his possible cannibalism.

Smit-Marais (2012: 163) suggests that like Richard Parker, both the Frenchman and the cook "function as alter-egos to Pi's character". This view is not as far-fetched as it appears if considered in relation to another tantalizing parallel between the episode with the Frenchman and Pi's second story. When the Frenchman attacks Pi, he screams out his intention to eat Pi's heart, liver, and flesh. Pi's description of how Richard Parker kills the Frenchman echoes his actions when he killed the cook. The cannibalism that Pi engages in after the Frenchman is killed has traumatic consequences for an already shattered mind. Pi states that "[s]omething in [him] died then that has never come back to life" (Martel, 2001: 255). At the end of this encounter and after he kills the cook, Pi turns to God. He recounts that he stopped consuming the Frenchman's flesh as soon as he caught a fish and that he prays for the man's "soul every day" (256). In the second story he states that after he killed the cook, he "turned to God" (311) and survived.

The arrival of the algae island episode immediately after the encounter with the blind Frenchman, blurs the lines between the fact/fiction and real/imagination dichotomies at play in the novel. Janes (2013: 120) states that the algae island narrative is a "key episode of interpretive contention in the novel". The algae island with its "[c]arnivorous trees...fish eating algae that produces fresh water ...[and] [t]ree-dwelling aquatic rodents" (Martel, 2001: 294) is a possible illusion that Pi's mind constructs in response to the cannibalism that he is forced to confront in the encounter with the Frenchman. When he first views the trees on this

impossible island, Pi is convinced that it is an illusion. Scherzinger and Mill (2013: 63) point out that “Pi represents the island to his audience just as he attempts to represent his trauma: ambiguously”. The intricate details that Pi weaves into his narration of this episode reveals the possible metaphorical alternative that his mind has constructed as a response to trauma. The lush, floating algae island that is woven so tightly that it provides a sturdy surface that can be easily traversed, coupled with its nourishing properties, provides a reprieve from the traumatic events that Pi has experienced up to this point of his story.

Pi reveals even more unbelievable episodes that weaken the suspension of disbelief that Martel has engendered thus far. Richard Parker, a Bengal tiger, does not attack and eat him and chooses instead to roam the island in search of food. The island itself appears to be a benevolent entity that is host to thousands of docile meerkats through which Richard Parker blazes “a trail of murder and mayhem, devouring one meerkat after another” (Martel, 2001: 269). However, the primal instincts demonstrated by the tiger do not immobilize Pi. He uses the island vignette to master the tiger to obey his commands, using circus training strategies to control the tiger. He trains Richard Parker to jump through hoops made from thin branches and rewards him with a meerkat when he accomplishes the routine. As Mr. Okamoto remarks, “a tiger is an incredibly dangerous wild animal” (296). The algae are also biologically structured to convert sea water into clear drinkable water. Lulled into a sense of safety and security, Pi fails to notice the underlying danger that the island represents. He discovers that at night the water in the pools become pools of acid, killing all the fish which swim into them. Pi realizes that the island itself is carnivorous and the Edenic illusion is shattered when he finds human teeth encased in vegetation that resemble fruit. Pi’s decision to set off and risk death in comparison to staying and facing an eventual “spiritual death on this murderous island” (283) explicitly conveys the unravelling of faith and hope in his mind. If this episode of his castaway tale is a symbolic representation of a possible mental breakdown, then Martel has successfully rescued his protagonist by providing him with an oasis where he can rest and recover sufficient physical and mental strength to continue on his journey. Pi reveals another important factor that is pivotal to his mental survival: “I could not abandon Richard Parker. To leave him would mean to kill him.” (283).

The mental wounds that Pi sustains as a result of his castaway experience have not healed and this is apparent in his revelation that “Richard Parker has stayed with [him]...in nightmares tinged with love” (Martel, 2001: 6). At this point the reader is oblivious to the identity of

Richard Parker. The illusion created here is that Pi is referring to a person who abandoned him “unceremoniously, without any sort of goodbye” (6). Pi compares the pain of that parting to “an axe that chops at [his] heart” (6). In the first chapter of the novel, Pi also offers an account of a stay at a hospital in Mexico where he recuperated from his physical wounds. He states that although his skin healed, he still has “scars on [his] shoulders and back” (7), the physical reminders of his traumatic experience. However, Martel also emphasizes the mental wounds that still plague the adult Pi. In the recounting of his first visit to an Indian restaurant in Canada, Pi is insulted by a waiter who berates him for using his fingers instead of a knife and fork. His “[f]resh off the boat, are you?” (7) remark traumatizes the castaway survivor. Pi states that the waiter had “no idea how deeply those words wounded” (7) him. Pi compares himself to the one religious figure who still troubles his mind: Jesus Christ. He describes the waiter’s words as “nails being driven into [his] flesh” (7). It is that one aspect of Christ’s suffering that he cannot understand. Why did Christ have to die as atonement for the sins of mankind? The elevation of his suffering to the agonies experienced by Christ reflects a deeply wounded psyche. Georgis (2006: 166) discusses the impact that Pi’s story had on her perception of survival and loss. The writer states that apart from providing “fresh insight about what it would mean to survive devastating loss”, it also gives an insight into “how the stories we construct to survive are the provisions we need to go on living”. In the first embedded frame of the novel, Martel demonstrates this transformative power of storytelling. While Martel obviously engages in storytelling as the author of the book, he ascribes exceptional storytelling prowess to the author-narrator and Pi Patel. From the outset, the author-narrator assumes authorial authority in documenting and writing Adirubasamy’s recounting of Pi’s story, and eventually Pi’s account of his remarkable castaway tale.

In Part 1 of the novel, the suffering that Pi intimates in the first line of his narration in Chapter 1 foreshadows an extremely traumatic event that is not revealed at this point of the novel. However, the imprint of that trauma is evident in the adult Pi’s life. According to Caruth (1996: 7) stories of trauma “far from telling of an escape from reality...rather attests to its endless impact on a life”. One of the episodes that clearly shows this far-reaching impact is Pi’s account of how he felt slighted when he did not receive “the Governor General’s Academic Medal, the University of Toronto’s highest undergraduate award” (Martel, 2001: 5). His response hints at the trauma that is revealed in Part 2: “The Pacific Ocean” and Part 3: “Benito Juárez Infirmary, Tomatlán, Mexico”: “When you have suffered a great deal in life, each additional pain is both unbearable and trifling” (5). Comparing his

life to “a memento mori painting from European art” (5), he states that “there is always a grinning skull at [his] side to remind [him] of the folly of human ambition” (5). The failure to receive the Governor General’s award is trifling in comparison to having experienced unspeakable horrors for 227 days on the Pacific Ocean and emerging as the sole survivor of that tragedy. Pi mocks the “grinning skull” (5) that is always at his side: “I look at it and say, ‘You’ve got the wrong fellow. You may not believe in life, but I don’t believe in death. Move on!’ ” (5). Pi’s transcendence from victim to survivor, evocatively conveyed in this statement, is echoed in his declaration that “life leaps over oblivion lightly, losing only a thing or two of no importance, and gloom is but the passing shadow of a cloud” (6).

Pi’s appeal to the author-narrator in Part 1 of the novel to tell his “jumbled story in exactly one hundred chapters, not one more, not one less” (Martel, 2001: 285) reflects a fragmented self that manifests as a “jumbled story” (285). This attests to the “endless impact” (Caruth, 1996: 7) that trauma has on one’s sense of self. This appeal to the author-narrator is Pi’s attempt at restoring control and imposing narrative coherence on a traumatized, chaotic universe. During the interview, Pi attempts to control the telling of his castaway tale. However, like the cookies that he hoards under the blanket, his stories crumble in the face of reason and rationality. The suspension of disbelief that Martel has carefully orchestrated diminishes when the officials refuse to accept the first story and insist on a more rational account. At the end of the interview Pi forces the officials to choose “the better story” (Martel, 2001: 317). When they choose the animal story, he thanks them and states “[a]nd so it goes with God” (317). He then bursts into tears. Thorn (2015:3) suggests that from a psychological perspective Pi’s better story is “little more than a profound psychological coping mechanism or a complex form of unconscious denial”. Pi’s reaction reveals more than all the words that Pi has used thus far to relate the ‘truth’ of what occurred during the castaway period of his life. A rational perspective of this deeply emotional reaction would most probably uphold the possibility that Pi has chosen the ‘better story’ as another coping mechanism. To accept the second story is to accept that he is a cannibal, and this may completely dismantle his already fragile psychic equilibrium. Furthermore, the confession to this ‘truth’ may result in an official investigation and possible prosecution for cannibalism. The novel’s privileging of Pi’s ‘better story’ is reflected in Georgis’s (2006: 169) perspective on this topic: “Pi’s better story may very well be a fantasy, designed to teach those who wish to listen that surviving difficulty and trauma is a creative act, and that we must construct our survival, seek ‘the better story’, so that we may live more ethically with others”.

## 4.2. Memory and Storytelling in a traumatic universe

At the beginning of this chapter the disparate stories that Pi relates to the Japanese officials are explored as narrative responses to trauma. The dissertation's focus now shifts to a consideration of memory and how this vital dimension of self-identification influences Pi's narration of his castaway tale. Martel presents storytelling as an invaluable mechanism of survival that helps Pi to make sense of and survive the traumatic events that unfold when the *Tsimtsum* sinks in the Pacific Ocean. Part 3 of the novel foregrounds some of Martel's most significant thematic concerns including the power of storytelling, faith, belief, religion, and the relativity of truth. However, there are two important themes that have not been explored in the dissertation: survival and the loss of innocence. Martel's novel is essentially a story of survival and, as a bildungsroman, it depicts his young protagonist's loss of innocence through storytelling. According to Rebecca Duncan (2008: 173), "scholars of survival and trauma narratives typically focus upon dynamics of memory and strategies for shaping remembered events into a narrative". In this section of the dissertation the relationship between memory and storytelling in Pi's traumatic universe is explored through this lens.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth (1991: 4) explores "the ways in which texts of a certain period – the texts of psychoanalysis, of literature, and of literary theory – both speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience". Caruth (1991: 7) states that at the core of traumatic stories there is "a kind of double telling...between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of unbearable nature of its survival". In *Life of Pi*, Martel's protagonist relates a story that takes as its focal event a shipwreck that leaves him orphaned and stranded on a lifeboat somewhere on the Pacific Ocean for 227 days. Pi Patel emerges as the sole human survivor of this traumatic event and it is through his narration of this "astounding story of courage and endurance in the face of extraordinarily difficult and tragic circumstances" (Martel, 2001: 319) that the reader is allowed a glimpse of the nature of his survival.

The structure of Martel's novel, with its frame narrative and subsequent embedded frames, presents the story as a type of fictional biography of Pi's life. Although *Life of Pi* is generally viewed as either biography or auto fiction (autobiography), I argue that the novel is a fictional

biography. The basis for this argument lies in the author-narrator's confession in the frame narrative:

He showed me the diary he kept during the events. He showed me the yellowed newspaper clippings that made him briefly, obscurely famous. He told me his story. All the while I took notes. Nearly a year later, after considerable difficulties, I received a tape and a report from the Japanese Ministry of Transport. It was as I listened to that tape that I agreed with Mr. Adirubasamy that this was, indeed, a story to make you believe in God. It seemed natural that Mr. Patel's story should be told mostly in the first person – in his voice and through his eyes. But any inaccuracies or mistakes are mine. (Martel, 2001: xiii)

From the outset, the author-narrator assumes authorial authority in documenting and writing Pi's account of his remarkable castaway tale. Pi's account, however, is an oral recounting of his remarkable tale elicited through interviews with the author-narrator. Janes (2013: 120) points out that this form of narrating "is inherently mobile and unfixed, it is the writer who translates experience into text, and thus fixes the narrative in its final form". Although the story is told in Pi's voice and through his eyes, it is the author-narrator who transforms Pi's "traumatic narrative from lived experience into textual record" (120). This mode of transmission, however, is a complicated process as confession and testimony is subjective and the author-narrator, as scribe, exercises a large measure of faith and believability in Pi's account. Furthermore, the fictional writer also accepts blame for "any inaccuracies or mistakes" (Martel, 2001: xiii), adding another layer of unreliability to Pi's story. Genette (1997: 385) draws attention to the role of the biographer in oral interviews and states that biographers generally assemble "scattered pieces of evidence". He emphasizes the unreliability of this mode as "the memory...and sometimes the embellishing imagination" (385) may transmit a certain degree of embedded unreliability to a text. In *Life of Pi*, Martel presents the reader with a twofold conundrum: the unreliability of memory in both Pi's oral account of his trauma and the author-narrator's written account of Pi's life story.

The relationship between memory and storytelling is explicitly conveyed through Pi's selective representation of his castaway experience. This appears to be endorsed by the author-narrator who structures the written account according to the interview notes. Pi begins with a back story of his present life in Toronto, a colourful account of his childhood, and teenage years in Pondicherry, and then presents an extensive account of his castaway

experience on the Pacific Ocean. The question that arises regards the specific arrangement of these episodes of Pi's life story in the novel. Janes (2013), in an outline of a possible chronological order, states that the account related to the Japanese officials should be placed first in the sequence. Pi, however, does not include the interview with the Japanese officials in his narrative frames. At the end of Part 2: "The Pacific Ocean" Pi ends his narration with an extension of gratitude to all the people who rescued, fed, clothed and tended to him in hospital. The only officials that Pi mentions in his account are the "Mexican and Canadian officials" (Martel, 2001: 286) who assist him to get to his intended destination: Canada. Pi states that these officials ensured "that from the beach in Mexico to the home of my foster mother to the classrooms of the University of Toronto, there was only one long, easy corridor I had to walk down" (286). One conclusion that can be drawn here is the possibility that the interview with the Japanese officials is an extremely traumatic event that he does not want to confront as the adult Pi. Georgis (2006: 169) provides a possible reason for Pi's seemingly deliberate omission. She states that "the truth of what it means to survive cannot be understood through with what is said but what is unsaid". From the frame narrative of the novel, Martel privileges the transformative power of storytelling and this is reflected in Pi's narration of his story. In the Author's Note, the author-narrator relates that "after considerable difficulties...[he] received a tape and a report from the Japanese Ministry of Transport" (Martel, 2001: xii). These non-fiction artefacts were received a year after his interviews with Pi Patel. The interview transcript and the excerpt from Okamoto's report are provided by the author-narrator at the end of the novel. In the author's note, at the beginning of the interview transcript, the author-narrator acknowledges his gratitude to Mr. Okamoto for providing the transcript and report. However, he does not reveal if Pi directed him to contact Okamoto, nor is there any indication that Pi is aware that the fictional writer is using these documents to bookend his life story.

In the third author-narrator disruption, the fictional writer observes that Pi is emotionally affected by the memories that he is recounting. The author-narrator's comment on memory conveys the psychological impact of trauma on Pi's mind: "Memory is an ocean and he bobs on its surface" (Martel, 2001: 42). With this one comment, the fictional writer shipwrecks the adult Pi on the Pacific Ocean. Pi's memory is compared to the Pacific Ocean, and he is viewed as a castaway adrift on its surface. The author-narrator also makes another observation in relation to Pi's memory. He notes that "[a]fter all these years, Richard Parker still preys on his mind" (42). Pi also reveals this in Chapter 1 when he states that he has never

forgotten Richard Parker. His memory of the day he reached land in Mexico is ever present in his mind. Although this is the fulfilment of his hope and faith that he would be rescued, Richard Parker's disappearance into the jungle devastates him. Pi states that he "wept like a child...because Richard Parker had left [him] so unceremoniously" (285). Pi's emotional reaction to the memories that he dredges from the recesses of his mind illustrates how these traumatic episodes "create a crisis" (Greenburg, 2007: 356).

Pi's memories of his childhood and teenage years are carefully selected, reflecting his capacity to manipulate the narration of his story. He relates how he trains the teachers and classmates to refer to him as Pi and not "Pissing Patel" (Martel, 2001: 20) thus "marking the beginning of a new time" (21) for him. His extensive account of his religious and spiritual development, his reconciliation of science and religion, and his detailed explanation of zoomorphism, all point to a selective reordering of his life story. In this way Pi is subliminally training the reader to accept the account of the castaway episode of his life. Chapter 97, "The story" (291) problematizes a reconciliation of the first story that Pi relates to the Japanese officials with the account that he provides in Part 2/ "The Pacific Ocean". Martel requires the reader to take a leap of faith and believe that the first story is the identical account that Pi reveals in Part 2. The second story is only revealed in the interview transcript and not elicited from Pi's memory of his castaway experience. Perhaps Chapter 56 of the novel can be read as Pi's reason for submerging the memory of the second story if it is the true version. Pi devotes the entire chapter to a rumination on fear which he views as "life's only true opponent" (161) that begins in the mind. He states that when faced with "your mortal end" (162) fear "nestles in your memory like a gangrene" (162) and seeks to rot "even the words with which to speak of it" (162).

The second story, with its graphic images of cannibalism, cannot be equated with the animal version. If the human version is Pi's 'truth', the horror that he experienced coupled with the fear of public shame and prosecution for cannibalism, would have rendered him incapable of fully articulating his trauma. According to van der Kolk (1998: 106), "traumatic memories come back as emotional and sensory states, with little capacity for verbal representation". However, in Part 2, Pi recounts an act of cannibalism in the Frenchman episode. This account reveals many parallels with the second story. The algae island episode, marking a possible mental breakdown, is also remembered with intricate details. The acidic ponds, with dead fish "floating up from deep down" (276) reflects a mind that is corrupted and defiled. He notes

that “the surface kept on being disturbed” (277). There was also “something disturbing about all those dead fish” (277). This conveys the possible psychological trauma that Pi refuses to confront. At one point of his journey, Pi recounts how memories of “events and encounters and routines” (192) are imprinted on his memory. On the other hand, he also reveals that he does not know if he can place all the episodes in order as his “memories come in a jumble” (192).

In the Mahisha episode Pi remarks on the instability of memory. His father’s intention is to teach his sons about the true nature of a tiger. The adult Pi, however, remembers the episode as a traumatic event. Pi states that he does not know if he saw blood when Mahisha attacks the goat, or if he “daubed it on later, in [his] memory, with a big brush” (Martel, 2001: 36). In “The Black Hole of Trauma”, van der Kolk and McFarlane (2004: 487) note that “[m]any survivors seem to be able to transcend their trauma temporarily and harness their pain in acts of sublimated creation...only to succumb to the despair of their memories in the end”. In the case of Pi Patel, the adult Pi appears to have transcended the trauma he experienced as a castaway. The author-narrator assures the reader that Pi’s story has a happy ending. The adult Pi appears to be a loving husband and a father of two children. At the beginning of the first embedded narrative Pi reveals that he is gainfully employed. It is through his memories of the suffering that left him “sad and gloomy” (Martel, 2001: 3) that he creates a fantastical story of survival and transcendence.

### **4.3. Richard Parker and Moccasin: Pi’s ‘truth’?**

The deconstruction of Pi’s ‘truth’ in *Life of Pi* is the main aim of this dissertation. Martel privileges storytelling as having its own truth and challenges the reader to abandon objective, factual truth and accept “the better story” (Martel, 2001: 317) as Pi’s ‘truth’. The novel engages the binary opposition of truth versus fiction and tests the limits of believability. To this end, the dissertation has thus far explored how Martel employs storytelling and an examination of religious narratives to convey the subjective nature of ‘truth’. However, in Part 3: “Benito Juárez Infirmary, Tomatlán, Mexico”, Martel adds another layer to this philosophical debate. When Pi presents two disparate stories to Okamoto and Chiba during the interview, they are challenged to accept one of the two stories as Pi’s ‘truth’. The reader is also drawn into this debate on the relativity of truth. Georgis (2006: 169) states that “Pi’s

story stages the problem of conflating truth with facts”. The novel challenges the reader to accept that absolute truth does not exist, and that truth can be reconstituted or ‘reframed’ from different narrative perspectives. To this end, this section of Chapter Four explores the symbolic connotation of the Richard Parker/Moccasin dichotomy in the parallel stories that Pi presents to the officials. Pi’s ‘truth’ will be analyzed against the backdrop of this exploration.

At the end of the interview Pi challenges the officials to verify a few pertinent points in relation to their agenda to find out what happened to the *Tsimtsum*:

“I told you two stories that account for 227 days in between.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Neither explains the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*.”

“That’s right.”

“Neither makes factual difference to you.”

“That’s true.”

“You can’t prove which story is true and which is not. You must take my word for it.”

“I guess so.”

“In both stories the ship sinks, my entire family dies, and I suffer.”

“Yes, that’s true.” (Martel, 2001: 316-317)

This extract epitomizes Martel’s privileging of the ‘better story’ over Pi’s ‘truth’. The officials’ agenda is to find out what happened to the *Tsimtsum*, and they are not emotionally invested in what happened to Pi. After Pi gives an account of how the ship sank, Okamoto concedes that “[t]he explanation for the sinking of the *Tsimtsum* is at the bottom of the Pacific” (Martel, 2001: 316). This is a clear indication that he does not believe that Pi is telling the truth about what happened on the Pacific. Swanepoel (2020: 6) suggests that although the officials choose the animal story as ‘better story’, “it is not the one that they believe”. Pi affirms his unreliability in the following statement: “You can’t prove which story is true and which is not. You must take my word for it.” (Martel, 2001: 317). The truth/fiction dichotomy that Martel engages in Part 3 challenges both the officials and the reader. It is impossible to differentiate between the true account and the fictional account that Pi creates during the traumatic castaway episode. However, there is one truth that Pi highlights: “In both stories the ship sinks, my entire family dies, and I suffer.” (317). Morse (2013: 31) is of the opinion that *Life of Pi* is “a story on perspectives” (1), hence truth should be viewed as “complex through many perspectives”.

Martel's vertical embedding of the narrative frames in *Life of Pi* projects Pi's life story from the Author's Note (*parergon*). The successive embedded narratives that are narrated by the adult Pi filter the story through these frames. The possible performative function of these frames is to influence the reader's perspective of Pi's castaway tale. Viewed through these frames, the disparate accounts presented in Part 3 destabilize the perception that Pi painstakingly cultivates from the *parergon*. His decision to relate the story with animals to the author-narrator perpetuates the illusion that this account represents the 'truth'. It is also the version that he recounts first to Okamoto and Chiba. Swanepoel (2020: 6) states that the two stories emphasize "the rift and the link between story and truth". The writer draws attention to how the events that Pi presents as "real in Part Two are now 'a story' " (6). In both the animal version presented during the interview, and in Part 2 of the novel, Richard Parker is predominantly featured. However, in the second story, the version distinguished by human brutality and desperation, Richard Parker is conspicuously absent. Morse (2013: 10) points out that "Richard Parker exists in one story, but not the other – and both stories belong to one grand narrative". In the second story, Pi substitutes the Taiwanese sailor for the zebra, the French cook for the hyena, and his mother for the orangutan. It is, therefore, reasonable to substitute Pi Patel for Richard Parker. Mr. Chiba makes this connection when he compares the two stories and concludes that this means that Pi is "the tiger!" (Martel, 2001: 311). According to Cloete (2007: 329) through "the cold brutality of Pi's story, Pi has sketched a picture of the beast in man – the recognition of the 'animal' in each individual's body-soul".

Richard Parker, the Bengal tiger, is not the only cat who features in Pi's life story. In the last author-narrator intrusion, the fictional writer observes that Pi's daughter Usha is carrying an orange cat, Moccasin. Stratton (2004: 18) describes Moccasin as a "pussy-cat version of Richard Parker". The author-narrator ends the note with a remark that prepares the reader for the horror encapsulated in the next embedded frame: "This story has a happy ending" (Martel, 2001: 93). The writer makes this assumption based on all the evidence he collects during his interviews with the adult Pi. Moccasin, a part of the "happy ending" (93) foreshadows another cat: Richard Parker. The juxtaposition of the tame Moccasin with the Bengal tiger can be viewed as Cloete's (2007: 329) "picture of the beast in man – the recognition of the 'animal' in each individual's body-soul". If the second story is accepted as Pi's 'truth', and Pi Patel is the tiger then Moccasin represents the adult Pi who has transcended the spiritual and moral depravity of cannibalism. In Chapter 8 Pi explains why man is the most dangerous animal in the zoo and recounts how his father "had painted on a

wall in bright red letters the question: DO YOU KNOW WHICH IS THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL IN THE ZOO?" (Martel, 2001: 31). An arrow pointing to a curtain was painted next to the sign and behind the curtain was a mirror. Pi remarks that they had to constantly replace the curtain as so many people pulled it aside to view what was underneath. Pi concludes that "we look at an animal and see a mirror" (31). Stephens (2010) comments on this aspect of human/animal correlation in the novel. The critic observes that when "Pi remarks, 'It was frightening, the extent to which a full belly made for a good mood' (236)" (Stephens, 2010: 55), Pi could be referring to himself or to Richard Parker. The 'fright' "seems to be, in part, recognition of how much like the tiger – how animalistic – he has become" (55).

To view Moccasin as a representation of Pi's moral and spiritual ascent is to take the leap of faith Martel encourages in the interpretation of his richly symbolic text. The novel's concern is with the suspension of disbelief and imbuing the reader with faith that the animal story represents a particular type of 'truth' not necessarily predicated on the manifest veracity of known 'facts'. However, it simultaneously attempts to subvert the possibility that the second story is the more believable story. Pi has had considerable practice in creating realities that are customized to fit into his universe. When his father gathers the family together for the lesson regarding the true nature of tigers, Pi, afraid of being chastised for some unknown infraction, cries out "I'm innocent...It's Ravi's fault, whatever it is. He did it!" (Martel, 2001: 32). Pi did not know that his father had called Ravi there for the same purpose. This points to Pi's need to control his narrative, whether it is at home and must protect himself from Ravi's bullying or in the classroom where he trains his teachers and classmates to call him Pi Patel. The measure of control that he demonstrates in his self-conscious renaming foreshadows the control he exercises over Richard Parker on the Pacific Ocean. However, it can also be a flashforward to the adult Pi who has reinvented his life and his story.

Pi's second story "can be read as Pi creating the Richard Parker story to survive, compartmentalising his sweet, spiritual self and his survivor cannibal self through a story" (Swanepoel, 2020: 6). When the Japanese officials insist on a story without invention, Pi replies with a question: "Isn't telling about something – using words, English or Japanese – already something of an invention?" (Martel, 2001: 302). The adult Pi has already had this conversation with the officials as the teenage Pi. More than twenty years later he reinvents his castaway tale when he recounts a story "that will make you believe in God" (xii). Throughout

his narrative frames Pi emphasizes his multi-faith belief in a universal God. He draws on the religious stories and teachings to provide himself succour during the trauma of the shipwreck. If the second story is Pi's 'truth', his attempts to bury this story can be viewed as his denial of the evil that he had to embrace as a cannibal. Cannibalism is a spiritual and moral corruption that the vegetarian Pi refuses to acknowledge. Marais (2018: 1) suggests that this is "a horrible and grim reminder of the corrosive effect physical deprivation can have on the human condition". The writer states that "Pi's story enables him to process and adjust to the tragedy of his ordeal; thus, he fictionalizes the 'truth' to ensure his physical and psychological survival" (3).

At one point of his narration, Pi reveals a 'truth': "It's the plain truth: without Richard Parker, I wouldn't be alive today to tell you my story" (Martel, 2001:164). This statement conveys two allusions. Firstly, the physical presence of Richard Parker instils within him "the will to live" (164). Secondly, if Pi is Richard Parker, then he resorted to cannibalism to survive. Perhaps the presence of Moccasin in his home is a constant reminder of the 'animal within' that Pi must not become. The novel "invokes metaphor and symbolism" in order to make sense of Pi's trauma and this suggests that "truth is not only made up of facts but also of our imaginative interpretation of these facts" (Marais, 2018: 9). Pi emphasizes the elusiveness of his 'truth' in his own words: "You can't prove which story is true and which is not." (Martel, 2001: 317). In the spirit of deconstruction, I will conclude this chapter with Mr. Okamoto's aside in the report: the "story of sole survivor, Mr. Piscine Molitor Patel, Indian citizen, is an astounding story of courage and endurance in the face of extraordinarily difficult and tragic circumstances" (319).

## Conclusion

Yann Martel's, *Life of Pi*, a multi-level novel, takes as its focal point the transformative power of storytelling in Pi Patel's traumatic universe. Martel utilizes narrative framing as a literary device to frame Pi Patel's "astounding story of courage and endurance" (Martel, 2001: 319). To this end, the dissertation focuses on the author's use of narrative framing as a literary technique, and on deconstructing Pi's 'truth' as it is conveyed in the embedded frames of the novel. Analyzed in the context of Jacques Derrida's description of the performance of the frame in *The Truth in Painting* (1987), the narrative frames demonstrate a potentiality to influence the reading and interpretation of Pi's castaway tale. The exploration of the key themes in the novel reveals the interconnectedness between storytelling, faith, belief, and religion. Furthermore, Martel's privileging of storytelling as a mode of representation is evident in the transmission of Pi's trauma through the stories that he recounts. What is inescapable is the view of *Life of Pi* as a story of survival "in the face of extraordinarily difficult and tragic circumstances" (Martel, 2001:319).

One of the main aims of this dissertation is to demonstrate the correlation between Martel's structuring of the novel as a series of nested frames and Pi's recounting of his castaway tale. Chapter Two of the dissertation addresses this topic with an extensive exploration of how texts are framed. At the beginning of the chapter the focus is on how the novel is framed from the threshold of the book, the paratextual framing. This exploration reveals how these liminal devices frame the reader's perception from the fringes of the text and mediates a relationship between the author, book, and reader. The examination of the Author's note (*parergon*), Adirubasamy's frame (*passe-partout*), and the successive embedded frames (*ergon*) points to the possibility that Martel purposely structures the vertical embedding of these frames to create a distance between the last frame, Okamoto's report, and Pi's narration of his life story. The "[i]nteraction between *ergon*, *passe-partout*, and *parergon*, has gained sufficient momentum to cast doubt" (Mill, 2013: 64) on the third embedded narrative frame, Part 3/ "Benito Juárez Infirmary, Tomatlán, Mexico". Pi's presentation of two disparate accounts to the officials during the interview problematizes any clear view of the 'truth'. However, viewed from Martel's framing narrative, and filtered through the successive frames elevates Pi's animal story as "the better story" (Martel, 2001: 317).

In *Life of Pi* Martel weaves an interconnected network of themes into the fabric of the story. Storytelling, faith, belief, religion, and spirituality is explored through this lens in Chapter Three of the dissertation. In this chapter I demonstrate how Pi's 'truth' is diffused through the interweaving of these themes and filtered through Martel's narrative frames. The significance of Pi's multifaith worldview and his belief in a universal God is analyzed against the backdrop of his physical and psychological survival. This exploration reveals a spiritually and morally transcended Pi. The intertextual reading of Pi's story as a biblical Job experience highlights Pi's unshakeable faith and belief in God. The religious stories that he is exposed to as a child, succours and sustains him during the traumatic castaway episode.

In the last chapter of the dissertation Pi's conflicting narratives are read as a response to trauma. From the outset Martel requires the reader to abandon credulity and believe that Pi's narration of his life story is the true version of events that he has experienced. Martel blurs the line between fact and fiction with an interview transcript that encloses Pi's somewhat allegorical account of what really transpired after the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*. In Chapter Four of the dissertation, I argue that the Pi's disparate narratives must be read as two parallel stories and not allegory. Although this deviates from the generally held view of the novel as an allegory, I provide sufficient substantiation for this theory to be upheld. Mill (2013: ii) uses the framed narrative, within the context of Jacques Derrida's description of the performance of the frame in *The Truth in Painting*, to propose that it "is a performance that suggests possibilities for the figurative representation of Pi's trauma". In the last section of Chapter Four, I suggest that the positioning of the frames simultaneously engenders a lasting ambiguity in the novel, and potentially points to Pi's 'truth'.

In *Life of Pi*, Martel's protagonist challenges the reader to look in the "mirror" and confront the "animal" that is reflected on its surface (Martel, 2001: 31). This is exemplified in Pi's remark that the cook "met evil" (Martel, 2001: 311) in him when he killed and cannibalized him. In this account "Pi has sketched a picture of the beast in man – the recognition of the 'animal' in each individual's body-soul" (Cloete, 2007: 329). From the beginning of the adult Pi's narration in "Toronto and Pondicherry", he emphasizes how the final parting with Richard Parker has always haunted him. In Pi's memory of this event "Richard Parker, companion of [his] torment, awful, fierce thing that kept [him] alive, moved forward and disappeared forever from [his] life" (Martel, 2001: 285). The recollection of this pivotal episode of his castaway experience could be construed as "Pi's recognition of the 'monstrous

double'...transformed into the fantastical saviour-victim: Richard Parker" (Cloete, 2007: 329). Pi the castaway, totally abandoned on the vast Pacific Ocean, engages in his own act of creation: the creation of the Other. Richard Parker is the antithesis of the humble, vegetarian Pi who values his communion with God. As Martel states, "whether it's the animal other, the cultural other, the religious other – it is through them that we come to understand ourselves" (Sielke, 2003: 20).

If the second story is the true account of what transpired during Pi's sea odyssey, then the intensely spiritual Pi is using his animal other to avoid confronting his spiritually and morally corrupt self. The self that drinks blood and eats human flesh in a corruption of the transubstantiation has to totally abandon the other if he is to embrace his humanity once more. When Pi describes how the Mexican women who found him on the beach scrubbed him so hard as if he "were the deck of a ship" (Martel, 2001: 286), it signals the cleansing that is pivotal to his rebirth as the human Pi. Richard Parker has to disappear as Pi's psychological survival is dependent on this excision. At the conclusion of the interview with the Japanese officials, Okamoto states that they will be careful when they drive away as they "don't want to run into Richard Parker" (317). Pi's response resonates with the possibility that he is Richard Parker: "Don't worry, you won't. He's hiding somewhere you'll never find him" (317). This response is not consistent with his first account where he insists that the tiger disappeared into the forest of Tomatlán, Mexico. However, if Richard Parker is a psychological projection of a traumatized mind, then Pi must have buried him deeply in his psyche. However, traces of the tiger are woven into the tapestry of Pi's narration of his present life as the adult Pi and into the narration of his intriguing childhood years. In Part 2 of the novel, Pi allows Richard Parker to make his debut as the Bengal tiger who becomes his sole castaway companion on the sea odyssey. In this literary *sanctum sanctorum* that is created by the embedded frame that encases the castaway tale, Richard Parker becomes the embodiment of Pi's greatest fears and his reason for living.

In this dissertation I have presented a perspective of *Life of Pi* that may be controversial and contrary to Martel's privileging of 'the better story' over factual truth. Perhaps this approach will challenge other researchers to extend the scope of research attempted in this dissertation. The generally held view of *Life of Pi* as allegory has also been subverted in favour of viewing Pi's disparate stories as two parallel narratives. This theory presents possibilities for interpreting Pi's castaway tale in new contexts. I have also suggested that the encasing of Pi's

narration in two discrete, embedded frames, provides enclosures where Pi weaves his 'truth' through storytelling. The second embedded frame encapsulates a story that appears to be the first story that Pi relates to Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba. The boundary that separates the second embedded frame from the interview transcript functions as a site that "allows for exchange" (Kalaga, 2016: 135). The juxtaposition of Pi's narration in Part 2/ "The Pacific Ocean" with the first story in the transcript frame creates the verisimilitude that is necessary to sustain the veracity that these accounts represent Pi's 'truth'. The second story thus becomes an invention of necessity, providing an alternative to the animal story that appears to be too fantastical to believe. The ambiguous and inconclusive denouement presents the reader with a choice of which story to believe as Pi's 'truth'. Martel concludes the novel with a lingering sense of sadness and what prevails is Pi's plaintive appeal to both the reader and the officials: "In both stories the ship sinks, my entire family dies, and I suffer" (Martel, 2001: 317).

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