

# Eco-psychology and The Role of Animals to Heal Trauma in *Life of Pi*

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## Abstract

Psychological trauma brings about adverse effects on affected victims and the manifestations vary from an individual to another. Some of the more common traits identified in trauma victims include extreme anxiety, nightmares, hallucinations and flashbacks; in which there is no specific reference of time on when a victim may start to exhibit these characteristics. In addition, the mode and duration taken for recovery of psychological trauma may also differ depending on the severity of the initial trauma and assistance available to trauma victims for recovery to transpire. As such, this present article intends to study the varied manifestations of trauma in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001) and to identify how trauma was negotiated through the human-animal relationship formed in the literary text. Besides employing concepts under Trauma theory, this article would also elucidate the concept of ecological unconscious under the lens of Eco-psychology to identify how the incorporation of nature, animals specifically, plays an integral part in the recovery process of a trauma victim.

**Keywords:** Animals, Eco-psychology, Recovery, Trauma.

## 1. Introduction

Themes pertaining to psychological trauma and recovery have become quite synonymous across numerous literary works in recent years. The huge rise of interest in this particular subject matter has provided writers fresh ways of “conceptualizing trauma and has shifted attention away from the question of what is remembered of the past to how and why it is remembered” (Whitehead, 2004, p.3). In most writings, the fictionalisation of grief and despair can be witnessed as a result of various incidents such as involvement in war, sexual abuse, enslavement or also bearing witness to a gruesome murder of a family member or a dear friend. Regardless of the source of trauma, all these victims exhibit certain traits of psychological disorders which will weigh them down and bring about adverse effects on the quality of their life. Some of these life-changing events may cause intense emotions, irritability and great emotional fluctuations that is able to bring great distress to the physical and emotional well-being of the trauma victims

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2003), Freud defines trauma as a painful event that is inflicted on the mind of a victim that ultimately leads to the physical breaking of defences (p.13). The victim's capacity to manage or withhold the emotions attached to the experience is surpassed as a result of intense amount of stress experienced. Subsequently, these experiences of traumatic ordeals differ from an individual to another as the development of post-traumatic stress disorder

(PTSD) occurs at different rates. Some victims may be able to re-experience it immediately after the incident whereby in other cases, PTSD may develop and haunt victims after weeks, months or even years in extreme cases. They may relive these intense and disturbing thoughts related to their upsetting traumatic experiences. While it can be considered to be natural to have some of these symptoms as an immediate response to a traumatic experience, a prolonged exposure to such experiences would surely bring a lot of damage to one's overall well-being.

Like Freud, Cathy Caruth (2016) too agrees that traumatic events are not actively available one's consciousness but re-enacts itself in a much delayed and belated address (p.18). These experiences may return to haunt the victims at a much later point of time which can remain to be incomprehensible and unknown to them. She views trauma as a story of the mind that attempts to address a "reality that is not otherwise available" (p.4) which ultimately penetrates the defensive shields of victims that weakens their existing barricades and breaches "the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (p.3). The writings of trauma can never be read straightforwardly as it's always a complex task to infer the knowing and not knowing entangled in the language of trauma and incidents linked to it. Herman (2015) claims that trauma overwhelms the victim and removes any control, meaning and connection with the awful experiences endured (p.75). Consequently, these manifestations and repeated disruption of trauma disables the victims to move on and to live a normal life. A great sense of lasting changes take place in the victims and it is unavoidable for them to develop other impediments associated with trauma-related disorders.

As the issue regarding psychological trauma and its related disorders are so broad, it is vital to identify new areas of study to determine fresh approaches in negotiating trauma among victims. It would be rather interesting to see how the field of psychology can be intertwined with other emerging fields to find new ways and solutions to provide effective coping mechanism strategies to combat the problem at hand. As such, the field of Eco-psychology has made waves in recent studies, be it clinically or in literary studies, and it's intermix of ecology and psychology can provide a medium to show the effectiveness of nature in helping to negotiate trauma-related problems among humans. Roszak, Gomes and Kanner (1995) asserted that the problem with modern day psychological theories is the lack of its capacity to live in balance with nature (p.vi). People fail to identify the pertinence of nature as well as the reciprocal relationship that can be formed between human and the natural surroundings. It is through the field of Eco-psychology that humans may be able to awaken this understanding and appreciate the true powers nature possesses to help better mankind.

Henceforward, this present article will explore the varied manifestations of trauma experienced as well as the therapeutic effects of nature under the lens of Eco-psychology in identifying how the human-animal relationship that was formed in the selected text, *Life of Pi* (2001) by Yann Martel, played a crucial role in helping the literary character to negotiate the trauma experienced. The concept of challenging dualism, an idea of awakening the ecological unconscious to turn the human psyche inside out, will also be examined to show the effectiveness of unifying with nature in order for individuals to seek help and guidance from the natural surroundings. The inherent sense of nature's benefits and reciprocity will be the guiding factors in the novel to establish an understanding of how members of the natural world, animals especially, can play an integral role in helping humans negotiate psychological tribulations.

## **2. Manifestation of Trauma in *Life of Pi***

The Booker Prize award winning novel *Life of Pi* (2001) by Yann Martel is a Canadian literary text that explores the themes of trauma, desperation, hope and also survival. The novel narrates the horrifying experiences of a sixteen-year old boy, Piscine Patel, who was described as the only survivor in the middle of the Pacific Ocean as a result of a shattering shipwreck incident due to a catastrophic typhoon experienced while migrating to Canada. This particular calamity claimed the lives of all others on-board including his entire family. Consequently, Piscine was left stranded for 227 days on a lifeboat with limited amount of food and medical supply. The narrative thickened when Piscine was quick to realize that he was not the only living being on the boat but was surprised to be accompanied by a group of animals that his father brought along from their zoo in Pondicherry that were meant to be relocated to Canada. Piscine was familiar with most of the animals as he have had personal experiences with them, nonetheless being in close proximity with a few wild animals surely made it extremely terrifying at first as he was still in great pain combatting his traumatic ordeals upon the devastating incident of losing his family.

The truthfulness in the version of story narrated by Piscine has always been a matter of concern to many academics as the traumatic ordeals that he went through raised great psychological distress and rendered him to be rather delusional. Losing all of his family members and also being isolated from any human contact for a lengthy period had put a great impact on his mental health and the effects were clearly manifested throughout the narration of the story. Piscine was faced with numerous obstacles that most certainly pushed him to his limits which subsequently almost drained his will to continue living. Traces of psychological anguish were starting to build from the very beginning of his ordeal and continued to develop as time progressed. There were moments when Piscine thought that there was no longer any hope in survival as help was nowhere to be found.

One of the first clear manifestations of trauma that Piscine experienced right immediately after the shipwreck was the constant fear of the strong currents and rough seas that surrounded him. The gushing of water reminded him of the fateful night when the thunderstruck hit his ship and claimed the lives of his whole family. Memories of his parents begun flashing upon him which made him rather disoriented. Bowman & Rachel (2004) stressed that such occurrences are rather common in a trauma-exposed individual who has witnessed actual threats or deaths as they are rendered to be in fear and horror (32). Piscine's anxiety grew as days progressed and the slightest of connection to the fateful night brought about great discomfort to him. The sudden rush of water around him left him rather incoherent as the "noisy, wasteful superabundant gush was such a shock" (Martel, 2001, p.8). Strong waves and torrential rains that occurred during his ordeal on the lifeboat too made it extremely difficult for him to escape ill memories of the incident and death of his parents.

Subsequently, Piscine was often visited by images and hallucinatory voices that further affected his state of mind and judgements. Laub (1992) claimed that this is normal in trauma victims as they are often affected by a distorted memory which is forcibly imposed by external evil and struggle of a delusion (p.79). In a particular instance, Piscine began hallucinating some voices and instructions from the sea that sounded like some secrets being shared with him on what he needed in order to survive. The voices told him that the scorching heat from the sun was rather "distressing and he should close [his] eyes and hide" (Martel, 272). There were also moments when these voices made fun of his mistakes and weakened his spirit. They were rather condescending and abusive which eventually made him scared as they were able to control his actions and ridicule his failure. Piscine felt that each struggle that he endured was being monitored closely, judged and laughed at by these external forces.

Such delusional thoughts continued to engulf Piscine as he eventually started having small talks back with these voices as well as episodes of monologues. For example, in a particular instance, Piscine proudly exclaimed that the entire nation has sent a search and rescue team to locate him. Piscine mentioned that “pilots were running to their planes with their shoelaces still untied, such was their hurry” (Martel, 2001, p.141) and “even submarines were swerving underwater to join in the rescue effort” (Martel, 2001, p.142). He frequently reassured himself that the entire machinery has been deployed to bring him back to safety. While having such a positive mind-set can surely be very important during such trying times, nonetheless, what began to develop in Piscine was a sense of being in-denial. This particular trait is a rather common occurrence in trauma victims as a form of defence mechanism that is instigated by the ego’s need to protect itself from an overwhelming stressor” (Horowitz, p.237). Evidently, there were no signs of help whatsoever for months and Piscine was left all by himself for a very long period. Piscine also spent hours every day looking at the companion animals that he had on-board as a form of distraction and a way to not acknowledge the truth of what had actually happened to him.

Nonetheless when he eventually realised that help was far from sight, Piscine’s depression and anxiety began to set in greater depth that eventually led him to start thinking of the worst. As he was no longer able to endure the intense pain and emotional scarring, he exclaimed that the lucidity was empowering him and such “oppressive sad feeling [was] truly unbearable” (Martel, 2001, p. 186). Piscine was at the lowest point of his life as the struggle to survive on the boat was indeed excruciating. The height of such a depression often leads to a self-induced pain and extreme measures. Despite Piscine did not mention explicitly that he no longer had much desire to live on but he did exhibit signs of giving up. The emotional commotion that plagued Piscine’s mind was attributed to the “failure to master the mental events of the outer world” (Maltsberger et al, 2011, p.682). Piscine was no longer afraid of death as he was described to be taking unnecessary risks in the middle of the ocean albeit the extreme dangers in posited. He could no longer comprehend the risks involved around him as he numbed himself from all such thinking.

The extreme conditions and total isolation left Piscine rather deranged and traumatised. A journey that was initially meant to be a fresh start in a new country ended up to be a tragic incident that affected Piscine’s state of mental health severely. This twist of faith and bitter irony left Piscine very much in a state of depression and paranoia. The endless effort to keep him alive with the limited resources available and lack of knowledge on survival skills gradually diminished his hopes and desires to continue the will to fight on the battle. Nonetheless, despite being fatigued and almost spiritless, suicidal was never something that he picked as he continuously searched for ways to keep him alive and overcome the struggles at hand.

### **3. Eco-psychology and the Role of Animals to Heal Trauma in *Life of Pi***

The field of Eco-psychology, which interweaves between ecology and psychology, has enabled human beings to better understand themselves and the natural world surrounding them. The idea of nature being a separate entity from humans should be negated altogether as such an understanding would impact negatively in fully comprehending and changing our attitudes and behaviour to the environment that surrounds us. Eco-psychology promotes the better understanding of the connection humans have to make with nature as “each one of us comes from the earth, is part of the earth and is on earth” (Morin, 1999, p.3). The reciprocal benefits that the natural world has to offer to humans does not confine to solely to food and natural remedies but extends beyond that which includes the betterment of psychological and mental health.

This unique correlation between the inner well-being and nature is closely linked to the ability of humans to create a psychic and spiritual equilibrium with the environment. In achieving this symmetry, one important aspect in the human mind, the ecological unconscious, has to be awakened. Roszak proposes that this consciousness “shelters the compacted ecological intelligence of our species” (p.304) and by tapping into it, humans can overcome the dualistic representations of the ecological and the psychological self and to achieve a mind that is fully immersed into the natural world. This trans-disciplinary branch of study brings great insights into the relationships humans can build with other members of the natural world by integrating their psyches to have a better understanding of themselves and nature in general.

As for *Life of Pi*, the awakening of Piscine’s ecological unconscious appeared to have taken place from the very beginning of the narration. Piscine spent most of his childhood days in the outskirts of Pondicherry located in the Tamil Nadu, India. His father, Santosh Patel, owned a zoo and it is through this set-up that Piscine grew deep interest in not only taking care of the animals but also was taught to better understand them. Piscine was taught on the characteristics, temperaments and different ways to handle of all the animals in the captive. Piscine was very accustomed to being surrounded by nature and was able to live in accord with the untamed animals without feeling any sense of estrangement. This particular act of harmony and being in peace with the environment echo the tenets of eco-psychology of always maintaining a non-violence approach to nature (Fisher,2013, p.55). He was taught to treat all the animals like a family member and any form of mistreatment was highly unacceptable.

Benefiting from these crucial years being surrounded by thick greenery and a fleet of different animals, Piscine found that engaging with the natural world was rather easy. Despite being cautioned by his parents on keeping a distance from some animals in the captive, this did not stop Pi in being inquisitive about them and grew keen interest to understand them well. His deep knowledge about these animals enabled him to be more affiliated to local surroundings. Piscine did mention that “in nature, the best times to visit are sunrise and sunset when animals come to life” (Martel, 2001, p.19). It was during these periods that he spent a lot of time amidst the magnificent surroundings and such experiences enabled him to overwhelm his senses and made him more eager to be connected with the natural world. This non-threatening camaraderie that was built between Piscine and the environment that surrounded him was enough to awaken his deep consciousness and appreciation for nature.

Besides, Piscine’s awakening of ecological unconscious can also be attributed to his multiple religious beliefs and being born into a vegetarian family. As he acknowledged animals be a close member of the family, and to be treated as one too, consuming them would be likened to committing cannibalism. He mentioned that humans should have a “peaceful vegetarian life in perfect harmony with its environment” (Martel, 2001, p.5). The environment should not be viewed merely from its material form but instead to be treated with mutual respect. Pi’s moral consciousness and also his responsibility to his animals in care pushed him to be a non-violent and nature-caring vegetarian who was able to view these other-than-human surroundings beyond mere object representation.

Since the question on Piscine’s ecological unconscious mind has been addressed accordingly, there were no qualms on the abundance of benefits he may appreciate from Mother Nature in helping him to recuperate from the traumatic ordeals he experienced in the aftermaths of the shipwreck. The close contact that he fortunately had with a number of animals throughout the 227 days of isolation on the lifeboat played an immense role in helping him negotiate the trauma being experienced. Subconsciously, these animals played a profound and facilitative role

in helping Piscine stay grounded and perceive the challenges at hand from complete differing angles. He was able to learn so much from these animals as their therapeutic abilities were extended unknowingly to Piscine but surely made him be more positive than he was right after the traumatic incident.

The human-animal relationship that was formed between Piscine and the many animals around him played a huge role in helping him to combat his anxiety and stress by being mindful and rather positive. His fear and anxious mind after being in isolation for a long period was kept in check and avoided from insanity to take over. These animals were able to keep Piscine fully present and on his toes throughout the situation and be aware of what was happening in his surroundings. These animals helped to provide a great distraction and were able to reduce pain, anxiety and negative mood (Beetz & Bale, 2016). Taking Richard Parker, the Bengal tiger, which was in Piscine's company for instance, helped him to avert thoughts about his perished family and to focus on the present. Piscine was made to be always on alert from an unprecedented attack from Richard Parker and this indirectly helped to temporarily forget about ill memories.

In fact, Piscine outwardly proclaimed that he grew fascination in Richard Parker as the animal was able to calm him down and bring him "peace, purpose and wholeness" (Martel, 2001, p.205). This form of distraction that Richard Parker, or the other animals, provided to Piscine echo the thoughts of Beetz and Schofmann (2016) who claimed that animals can buffer stress or negative emotions among humans (p.112). The highly engaging environment that Piscine was placed in after the shipwreck surprisingly enabled him receive optimal distraction to haze the feeling of solemn and despair he was experiencing. The newly formed friendship with the animals allowed Piscine to up-lift his spirit, eradicate fear and release his deep concerns and tribulations.

Besides alleviating anxiety and stress, the presence of animals can promote ideal positive setting and empathy as they can sense emotions and state of mind among trauma victims (Albuquerque et al, p.4). The therapeutic alliance formed between human and animals function as a way to emotionalize traumatised individuals and convert their threatened state of minds into something more happy, relaxed and resilient. In *Life of Pi*, having the zoo animals by Piscine's side during the trying times mitigated the fear in him and helped to lighten up tensed moments. For example, Piscine claimed that despite the tragedy, the presence of Orange Juice (the orang-utan) "cheered [him] up allowed [him] to let out a laugh and [to feel] fine" (Martel, 2001, p.152). Having Orange Juice on the boat was surely comforting to Piscine as she reminded him of good days and her funny antics made him laugh and lighten up difficult moments.

Successively, the newly formed alliances with the animals on-board also helped Piscine to eradicate loneliness and have a family-like support system. With the passing of all his family members, Piscine was left vulnerable and extremely lonely. Fortunately, the likes of Orange Juice and Richard Parker filled in the void that was left and assisted him to make his solo survival voyage more bearable. Aubrey Fine in *Handbook on Animal-assisted Therapy* claimed that animals provide support and care that can be likened to what family members offer. They possess therapeutic and psychotherapeutic abilities and are able to shower individuals with love and also facilitate interaction between humans. Similar to the experience of Piscine, he acknowledged that the intermittent visits from the sharks and dolphins were like "curmudgeonly old friends who would never admit they liked [him] yet came round to see [him] all the time" (Martel, 2001, p.275). Be it minimal, the interactions that he had with these animals made him feel that he was still cared for and not all alone stranded in the middle of nowhere.

Lastly, these interactive and facilitative roles that were established between Piscine and the animals, kept his mind off from far worse detrimental thoughts that were deviant or suicidal.

Despite the emptiness that he felt inside, these animals were the driving force for him to stay alive as he also felt responsible in getting them back to safety. According to Greenbaum (2006), animals act as “transitional objects that encourage present-minded thoughts and reality-orienting focus for people who are psychologically affected” (p.52). Piscine reminded himself that Richard Parker was the reason he stayed alive as the Bengal tiger kept him “from thinking too much about [his] family and tragic circumstances” (Martel, 2001, p.207). ). The bizarre companionship that was established between them played a fundamental role in keeping Piscine sane at all times and to avoid endangering thoughts from plaguing his mind.

#### 4. Conclusion

In summation, the novel *Life of Pi* is a literary text that encroaches deeply issues pertaining to trauma and recovery. The catastrophic shipwreck that was caused by the untimely typhoon most certainly brought about an immense load of psychological trauma to Piscine. Losing the entire family in a blink of an eye and being isolated for a lengthy period with limited supply of resources and extreme conditions were extremely difficult moments to be endured by anyone. As such, it could be seen how the manifestations of trauma were rather apparent in Piscine as he started having series of depression, anxiety, flashbacks as well as hallucination. The extremity of events that unfolded for Piscine was truly excruciating and brought severe effects to his mental health. Fortunately, Piscine was able to persevere all the psychological dilemmas faced and survived the ordeal with the help that he garnered from the animals around him. The awakening of Piscine’s ecological unconscious and a keen understanding of the natural world since a young age were the key elements in allowing him to subconsciously realise the importance in connecting with nature. By tapping into his ecological unconscious, Piscine was able to establish a unique living arrangement with the animals as well as the natural surroundings. The animals helped him to negotiate the traumatic ordeals he was facing and were the key reason to his survival. The intrinsic and extrinsic qualities that the animals possessed were useful to Piscine as he was able to absorb and apply it for his survival.

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