*The Life of Pi*, written by Yann Martel, is an intriguing novel from the magic-realism genre that explores issues of morality. The conflict between the conscious and rational thoughts of the main character Pi and his implied, repressed animalistic behaviours lends itself well to a psychoanalytical reading. *“Psychoanalysis constitutes one approach to* the *question of good versus evil, and especially of suffering and error.”* (*Lye 1998 p.185*) It analyses “*microstructures of power within the individual*” (Felluga 2011) assessing how a character’s ideology is formulated by a complex of human desires. Hence, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate how the application of twentieth century Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical theory illuminates Pi’s ability to balance his instincts and conscience in the face of adversity.

*The Life of Pi* follows the misadventures of Piscine Patel, a young, highly spiritual Indian living in Pondicherry, who practices three religions simultaneously. Pi, the son of a zoo keeper, is fascinated by the behaviour of the animals he cares for. Whilst on route to Canada aboard a cargo ship filled with zoo animals, disaster strikes. The ship sinks, leaving Pi stranded on board a life boat along with a tiger named Richard Parker as well as an orang-utan, hyena and an injured zebra. The hyena kills the zebra and the orang-utan before Richard Parker kills the hyena, thus leaving Pi alone with the tiger. Pi tames and controls the tiger in order to survive. Once Pi finally washes ashore in Mexico, he is interviewed by officials investigating the sinking of the cargo ship. Pi tells two versions of his ordeal: the first involves the above animals, while the second replaces the hyena with a grotesque sailor, the zebra with an injured deck hand and the organ-utan with Pi’s mother. Richard Parker no longer exists in this second recollection. The representations of these animals are a crucial element in understanding Pi’s disjointed psyche.

Psychoanalysis, the theory of human behaviour, suggests that “*people’s conscious thoughts and actions in everyday life may be shaped by unconscious motives*” (Moon, 2005, p.) All variants of the psychological approach *“endorse, at least to a certain degree, the idea that literature...is fundamentally entwined with the psyche.”* (Waugh, 2006, p.184) Therefore, a psychoanalytical approach can be used to analyse a character’s behaviour and attitudes as evidenced in the formation of the micro-power-structures within that character’s psyche. Furthermore, by demonstrating the influence of the internal micro-structures, a character’s psychology can be shown to be aligned with or contradictory to the ideological values of the society in which they live. Those behaviours and thoughts which are conflicting to socially acceptable values are said to be a result of the unconscious mind, and thus are repressed by the conscious mind. This ‘battle’ between the conscious and unconscious is a crucial element in the theories of Sigmund Freud.

According to Freud, for a character to be introduced into a civilized society, their primitive desires are *“sublimated or diverted towards other goals that are socially higher”* by their conscious mind. (Felluga 2011) Freud postulates that although primitive instincts may have been repressed, they continually threaten to ‘return’. This insistent return of the repressed therefore creates a struggle between the various subsections of a character’s psyche. Freud models this conflict through his theory of the id, the ego and the superego. The id acts as a reservoir of primitive repressed desires and seeks to express that which is considered to be unacceptable or evil. However, *"the ego has the task of bringing the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies, and endeavours to substitute the reality-principle for the pleasure-principle which reigns supreme in the id."* (Freud as cited in Felluga op. cit.) Meanwhile, the super-ego acts as a censor, deciding what shall be “*permitted or prohibited by way of expression or repression*” (Pope, 2001, p.99) The super-ego, by acting as a mediator, is recognised by Freud as an image of a socially internalised sense of self, whereas the ego is recognised as a free-spirited pre-social sense of self. The ego is prompted by both the primitive desires of the id, as well as by the conscience of the superego. This internal conflict demonstrates the “*sense of dynamism within the conscious self*” (Pope, 2001 p.99) in that a character’s identity is split into different versions of self, and as such can never be completely aligned with a character’s own conscious view of themselves.

As Pi’s adventure on board the life boat develops, the conflict between the multiple versions of Pi’s psyche intensifies. In particular, Pi’s repressed primitive instincts and desires begin to be expressed and his ego and super-ego struggle to ‘re-repress’ them. Pi’s strong religious morality forms the foundation of his super-ego, as he says by not having faith “*we sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality*.” (Martel 2002 p.15) This strong religious affiliation represents Pi’s self-internalised view of his psyche - that he is a morally sound soul who has both the intellectual and spiritual ability to commit to belief. However, as Freud argues, Pi’s own perception of his psyche, in an almost narcissistic way, excludes unfavourable elements and is thus in inherent misalignment with his true psyche. The sinking of the cargo ship and Pi’s subsequent ordeal unveils the fractured nature of Pi’s psyche.

Throughout the novel, there are multiple implicit representations of his split psyche. Pi detaches himself from thoughts and acts that are contrary to his religious views, and instead transfers these unfavourable characteristics upon the different animals, especially Richard Parker who is a projection of Pi’s id. Pi’s actions and behaviours represent his ego. This is evident in that Pi controls and dominates Richard Parker in order to preserve his own life. Recollections such as *“I grabbed the rat and threw it his way... he [Richard Parker] seemed satisfied with my offering*” (*Martel, 2002 p.153*) demonstrate that Pi, the ego, both literally and symbolically feeds Richard Parker, the id, in order to suppress its animalistic desires and to ensure his own survival. Although Pi distances himself from his own id, he realises that without these primitive instincts, “*without Richard Parker*”, he would not be able to endure the survival situation he is faced with, stating “*If I still had the will to go on, it was thanks to Richard Parker*” (Martel 2002 p.164). Thus, instead of attempting to kill Richard Parker, Pi endeavoursto tame him.

Initially, Pi’s religious beliefs act as what Freud calls the “ultimate judge” in that his superego decides what shall and shall not be permitted to be expressed. However, as the survival situation Pi is faced with deepens, the control the superego has diminishes as he is driven towards primitive acts; the repressed id begins to re-emerge. In need of food in order to satisfy Richard Parker, Pi must kill an animal: *“a lifetime of peaceful vegetarianism stood between me and the wilful beheading of a fish” (Martel, 2002 p.183).* Pi becomes torn between the survival instincts of his id and the morality of his superego. Eventually, Pi chooses to act in order to survive, signifying a crucial moment in the conflict between the subsections of his psyche. The increasing influence of his id, begins to dominate Pi’s actions, thus the power of his superego begins to diminish: *“In such a short period of time I could go from weeping over the muffled killing of a flying fish to gleefully bludgeoning to a death a dorado... it was plain and simple: a person can get used to anything, even to killing” (Martel, 2002 p.185)*

The fractured and disjointed nature of Pi’s psyche is most clearly revealed when Pi recounts an alternative story about his survival, in which all animals are replaced with humans except for Richard Parker, who no longer exists. Pi confesses that it was he who killed the sailor, not Richard Parker, stating *“then we fought and I killed him... he gave up.” (Martel, 2001 p.310)* Pi also admits to eating the dead sailor. In order to maintain the internalised sense of self that has been created by Pi’s religious values, he initially does not accept responsibility for the killing; he instead projects his guilt upon a figment of his psyche, Richard Parker. Therefore, Pi’s true thoughts and behaviours directly contradict the morality of his superego. Pi’s conscious mind chooses to identify itself with the most “*socially acceptable sense of self*” (*Pope, 2002 p.98*) when in reality, Pi’s psyche is akin to that of a primitive tiger.

Heavily influenced by the works of Freud, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan developed a alternative view of the human psyche. Lacan, unlike Freud, adopted a structuralist approach, theorising that the human mind is structured like a language that “*operates across the unconscious-conscious divide*” (*Lacan 1969 p.245*). Lacan divides his theory of psychosexual development into three orders: the real, the imaginary and the symbolic in what is sometimes referred to as the Borromean Knot in that the three orders are inextricably linked. Similar to Freud, Lacan asserts that a balance must be maintained between the three orders; a disruption to this balance can cause psychosis.

Lacan describes the real as the ‘pre-language’ stage which comes before the symbolic stage and which provokes desire. Uncontrolled, the real can become a horrifying element of a character’s psyche as the lack of language, and thus, lack of communicable social conventions gives free reign to primitive desires. This is evident in the first days and weeks aboard the boat which are marked by savagery. The presence of the animals symbolises the pre-language situation Pi is faced with. He states that “w*hen your own life is threatened, your sense of empathy is blunted by a terrible, selfish hunger for survival.”* (Martel 2002 p.138) Thus, he loses his humanity as the conventions and discourses of society no longer exist and Pi must live by the laws of nature, like other animals. Following the brutal death of Orange Juice, Pi realises that he is next to be killed, that is until Richard Parker emerges: “It *seemed the presence of the tiger had saved me from the hyena.*” (Martel 2002 p.136) Pi refers to Richard Parker as the “*superior predator*”, demonstrating that he is submissive within a hierarchal animal structure and, thus, is no longer operating under the conventions of the society. This viciousness is echoed in Pi’s secondary story when he graphically describes his killing of the sailor following the beheading of his mother: *“I stabbed him in the throat... I stabbed him repeatedly. His blood soothed my chapped hands... His heart was a struggle, though it tasted delicious*” (Martel 2001 p.311) Despite possessing the ability to communicate, the actions of the human characters, particularly Pi himself, still reflect the pre-language, real order. This is similar to Freud’s concept of the ‘pleasure-principle’ in that Pi is operating within a purely ‘needs’ based discourse.

The imaginary, however, marks a character’s entrance into language. During this stage, distinctions begin to be made by a character’s unconscious mind about what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. In this sense, Lacan’s theory of the imaginary correlates roughly to Freud’s theory of the ego as both serve as the mediator between a character’s internal values and those of the external world. The recognition of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, however, causes a character to fear the primitive animalistic elements of their own psyche, that are prevalent in the real, as they are now deemed to be ‘wrong’. In response, the unconscious mind suppresses and censors these elements in what Lacan calls “*the censored chapter*” of the human psyche which Lacan refers as “the other”, and asserts that *“... the unconscious of the* [character] *is the discourse of the other*.” (Lacan 1969 p.89) Henceforth, a character’s thoughts and behaviours direct a reader to understand how ‘the other’ has been repressed by the conscious mind in order to obtain a character’s ideal sense of ‘self-recognition’. According to Lacan, A character does not accept the characteristics of ‘the other’ as an intrinsic element of their own psyche, thus, they can never fully recognise themselves as a whole, unified identity.

Pi initially cannot recognise his own primitive, animalistic behaviours as they form ‘the other’ of his psyche. It is for this reason that Pi disassociates himself from the primitive acts aboard the lifeboat, and instead projects these characteristics upon the figment Richard Parker. However, as theorised by Lacan, the “*censored chapter”* of Pi’s psyche reappears through the novel, through symptomatic language. After days without food or water, both Pi and Richard Parker go blind. Pi prepares to die stating: “*And now I leave matters in the hands of God, who is love and whom I love*” (*Martel, 2002 p.240) W*hilst blind and semi-conscious, Pi hears a voice with a French accent; he assumes it is Richard Parker. This projection could be seen to be a result of Pi’s psychosis, due to the imbalance of the Borromean Knot. Pi asks if the stranger has ever killed before, to which the voice admits to having killed a man and a woman. Pi states: “t*he very definition of an animal. That’s all you are.” (*Martel 2002 p.251*)* The encounter with the stranger is a clear projection of ‘the other’ within Pi’s psyche as it represents the animalistic elements which Pi’s conscious mind is unwilling to accept. Pi’s blindness is also a clear form of symptomatic language as it symbolises Pi’s own ignorance of the censored chapters of his past.

The symbolic order is the state in which a character is exposed to linguistic communication and the ideological conventions of society. It is the acceptance of what Lacan calls “Law of the Father”: the “*laws and restrictions that control both your desire and the rules of communication*” (Felluga 2011). By recognising and conforming to the Law of the Father, a character may enter into civilised society. It is evident that Pi makes a conscious attempt to obey the Law of the Father, and thus move into the symbolic order, when he attempts to train Richard Parker. In doing so, Pi begins to restore the balance of the Borromean Knot by reducing the influence of the real. This is furthermore exemplified when Pi and Richard Parker drift onto a mysterious island made entirely of algae and inhabited by meerkats. Pi, who indulges in the replenishing bounty of the island, initially states “*nothing could push me to return to the lifeboat and the suffering and deprivation I endured*.” (Martel, 2002 p.279) Pi becomes content with his bizarre new life style. However, when he discovers that the island is carnivorous, he makes a conscious decision leave the island, stating he would “*prefer to set off and perish in search of my own kind than to live a half-life of physical comfort and spiritual death on this murderous island*.” (Martel 2002 p.279) This decision clearly marks a decisive change from a purely needs-based discourse, to one in which the Law of the Father is obeyed. The representation of the carnivorous island is also a form of symptomatic language that alludes to Pi’s own cannibalism. However, rather than simply refusing to acknowledge ‘the other’, Pi consciously and rationally rejects this projection and thus actively attempts to conform to the social discourse opposing cannibalism. Pi’s final return to the symbolic stage is depicted when Richard Parker immediately abandons him after washing ashore in Mexico: “*Richard Parker, companion of my torment, awful, fierce things that kept me alive, moved forward and disappeared forever from my life.” (Martel 2002 p.284)* With the abandonment of his internalised projection, Pi’s psyche is no longer disjointed; rather, guided by the Law of the Father, he finally takes ownership of his actions aboard the lifeboat.

It is clearly evident that both psychoanalytical approaches are highly useful in exploring the ability of Pi’s psyche to balance his morality and instincts. The application of Freud’s theory of the id, ego and superego clearly demonstrated the plurality of Pi’s internalised sense of self. His superego, based on his religion, created a strong sense of morality that forced the separation of his id from his psyche. Similarly, Lacan’s theory of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic explains the separation of Pi’s primitive animalistic desires from his conscious mind. However, unlike Freud, Lacan’s concept of the Law of the Father recognises man as a cultural being and accounts for the presence of cultural discourses operating within language.

Additionally, Lacan’s theory of ‘the other’ explicitly explains the censorship of primitive desires, whereas Freud only implicitly refers to the separation of repressed desires from the conscious psyche. Furthermore, a Lacanian approach allows for the explanation of Pi’s growth from cannibalism to civilisation. Thus, it can be said that a Lacanian approach allows for a deeper interpretation of Pi’s psyche and has more clearly illuminated how Pi balances his primitive instincts and his morality.

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