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Shedding of Sheaths: The Journey to Inner self in Yann Martel's Life of Pi.

Aashlesha V. Lele

Research Scholar, Research Centre English, SVKM's Mithibai College of Arts, Chauhan
Institute of Science and Amrutben Jivanlal College of Commerce and Economics.
(Empowered Autonomous)

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Abstract

Self-discovery, a deeply personal and universal journey, has been explored through diverse cultural and philosophical lenses. Traditionally, human personality is understood as a blend of physical, mental and spiritual dimensions. In the western context, various psychological frameworks have attempted to explain the self, focusing primarily on the mind and behaviour. In contrast, eastern traditions, particularly the Upanishads, offer a more holistic approach, viewing personality as a means to achieve happiness (Anand) and inner harmony. The Taittiriya Upanishad describes the human personality as comprising five sheaths, or Panchkosh, each representing a layer of existence. The process of shedding these sheaths is seen as a gradual journey toward self-knowledge and understanding the true self, answering the existential question of "Ko Aham?" (who am I?) This Vedantic perspective offers a profound lens through which self-discovery can be understood not just as an individual pursuit but as a universal quest for meaning.

This paper explores the journey of Piscine Patel, the protagonist of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, through the framework of the panchkosh. By analysing Pi's struggles on a lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean, the study demonstrates how his spiritual, emotional and physical trails mirror the progression through the five sheaths. Martel's narrative intertwines eastern spiritual philosophy with global themes, offering a unique synthesis of eastern and western thought. This analysis highlights the universal nature of the search for identity and meaning, quest for self-discovery, illustrating how Pi's journey embodies the broader human pursuit of understanding one's true self.

Keywords: Panchkosh, Shedding of Sheaths, Life of Pi, Yann Martel, Inner Self, Self-discovery.

Introduction

The Panchkosh theory, as elaborated in the Taittiriya Upanishad presents a profound Vedantic perspective on the understanding and knowledge of human personality. It defines a framework of five sheaths or layers, each representing a distinct layer of existence. Every Kosh of the Panchkosh represents specific characteristics. These sheaths are presented hierarchically, with each progressively subtler and closer to the essence of the true self. This ancient Indian model offers a holistic view of personality, integrating the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of human life. The five sheaths are structured as follows; The outer most sheath 'Annamaya Kosh' (food sheath), 'Pranamaya Kosh' (vital air sheath), 'Manomaya Kosh' (mental sheath), 'Vijnayamaya Kosh' (intellectual sheath) and 'Anandamaya Kosh' (bliss sheath). 'Annamaya Kosh', the outermost layer constitutes of physical body, nourished by 'Anna' or food and represents the grossest aspect of human existence. 'Pranamaya Kosh' is the layer nourished by 'Prana' or 'bioenergy' which encompasses the life energy (prana) that sustains and animates the body. This layer governs the physiological functions and vitality of an individual. 'Manomaya Kosh' is a layer which represents the mind, emotions, and thoughts. This layer is nourished by education, social interactions, and experiences, shaping an individual's perception and emotional responses. 'Vijnanamaya Kosh' is the layer nourished by 'ego' and is subtler than the previous ones. It represents discernment, reasoning, and ego, serving as the seat of wisdom and decision-making. It is the aspect of personality that enables one to analyze and understand the world. The innermost layer, 'Anandamaya Kosh' is the layer nourished by 'emotions' which represents pure joy, inner peace, and connection to the divine essence. It is the culmination of self-realization, where the individual experiences unity with the ultimate reality.

The Panchkosh theory thus presents a comprehensive hierarchy of personality. It illustrates the intricate interplay of the human mind, body and soul. Each sheath of the Panchkosh has its own characteristic feature. By systematically transcending these sheaths, one can journey inward to discover the true self, thereby achieving harmony, happiness (Ananda), and liberation (Moksha). Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* mirrors this philosophical framework through its vivid narrative a similar journey of its main character towards his understanding of his Inner self. This happens through a series of events which take him towards self-discovery.

Discussion on major concepts:

Discovering and nurturing the inner self is a journey which is as unique as each individual undertaking it. There are varied paths and approaches to uncover the true self or Atman. Reflecting the diversity of human experience or aspirations. Unlike the western concept of the self-actualization presented by Abraham Maslow in his Hierarchy of Needs, the Panchkosh theory from the Taittiriya Upanishad proposes different vision, an inward concentric journey that progressively discovers the inner self or Atman layer by layer. This approach stands in contrast to Maslow's model, which describes a linear, upward progression through a series of needs that culminate in self-actualization, the epitome of personal development. The Panchkosh theory however emphasises an inward journey through concentric layer of existence, each representing a different aspect of the self that just be understood and transcended in order to reveal the true self.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs classifies human needs into two groups- Basic needs and Meta needs. Basic needs include physiological requirements like safety, love and belongingness, and esteem which are foundational for survival and wellbeing. Meta needs on the other hand are related to higher level needs related to higher levels of human potential and personal growth, culminating in self-actualization where an individual realises their true potential and become their true self. Maslow's model is structured as a pyramid with basic needs forming a broad base and self-actualization at its narrow peak symbolising the fewer individuals who achieve this ultimate state of being.

In contrast, the Panchkosh theory does not describe an upward climb but rather a journey inward, moving through successive five layers or 'sheaths' that encase the Atman, the true self. These Koshas- Annamaya, Pranamaya, Manaomaya, Vijnanamaya, Anandamaya, represent different dimensions of human existence. The transcendence through the layer involves peeling away the external, more superficial aspects of the self to unearth the innermost core, the Atma, which is pure, unchanging and eternal. This inward voyage is not about acquiring more or achieving something external but about stripping away the crude layers of illusion and conditioning to realise the true essence of human existence that has always been present.

Sri Aurobindo in his 'Essays on Gita' elaborates in the idea of a "spiritual personality" which he describes as a complex structure involving both a concentric and a vertical system. In his book, 'The Life Divine' he further says "We have three powers, the Purushottama as the Supreme truth into which we have to grow, the Self and the Jiva." (472) According to Sri Aurobindo, human consciousness is not a simple, one-dimensional entity but rather a layered and interconnected system. The concentric system consists of a series of sheaths or rings, similar to those described in the Panchkosh theory. The outermost circle is comprised of the awareness of the physical body, the vital body i.e. energy sheath, and the mental sheath. These three types of consciousness are deeply interconnected, influencing and interacting with each other in complex ways.

The inner circles in Aurobindo's model represent higher levels of consciousness, leading to innermost core, which he identifies as the Psychic Being, a spark of the Divine that resides within each individual. The Psychic Being, also known as the Atman, is in constant connection with the Universal Mind or Supreme Energy, which transcends individual existence and connects all beings. The goal of spiritual practice, according to Sri Aurobindo, is to bring the Psychic Being to the forefront of Consciousness, allowing it to guide and direct the outer layers to the Self. This process involves not only an inward journey through the concentric layers but also a vertical ascent toward higher levels of spiritual awareness and unity with the Divine.

This concept of sheaths or layers that conceal the true self is not unique to Indian philosophy. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato, in his 'Phaedrus' describes the journey of the soul, a similar idea, using the chariot allegory. The soul here is likened to a charioteer with two winged horses, and when a soul loses its wings, which symbolise its connection to the divine, it falls to the earth and is incarnated in a human body. The Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato's writings especially by writers like Plotinus describe the soul taking on layers or garments as it descends from the heavens to earth. As it transcends from it passes through different planetary spheres, receiving gifts from each that contribute to its abilities and virtues. By the time the soul reaches earth, it is burdened with these "garments", which represent the various layers of experience and conditioning that accumulate over a lifetime.

These garments, much like the sheaths in the Panchkosh theory, obscure the self and prevent it from expressing its full potential. Throughout life, individuals encounter various situations- education, work, relationships, challenges and suffering- all of which add layers to the self, shaping one's identity and personality. Some of these layers may be light and beautiful, while others may be heavy and difficult, but all of them contribute to the complex structure of the self. Over time, these layers can become burdensome, weighing down the soul and preventing it from moving freely and fulfilling its true purpose. This metaphor of garments suggests that the journey of life is about shedding these layers to free the soul and allow it to return to its original unburdened state. The idea that life is a journey of shedding layers to reveal the true self is echoed in various spiritual traditions around the world. In Indian philosophy, this process is often described as a journey of self-realization, where one moves inwards through the layers of the panchkosh, to discover the Atman. In Christianity, the concept of the "false self" and "true self" reflects a similar idea. Where the individual must strip away the false self-composed of ego. Desires and worldly attachments- to discover the true self, which is aligned with the Divine will.

Detailed analysis

Life of Pi is a Canadian philosophical novel by Yann Martel published in 2001 explores the overwhelming journey of its protagonist's Piscine "Pi" Patel, an Indian Tamil boy from Pondicherry. The book spans through his experiences after a shipwreck when he survives for 227 days while being stranded on a lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean with Richard Parker, a Bengal Tiger. The protagonist, Pi Patel, embarks on a journey that mirrors the stages of the Panchkosh theory. Pi faces a series of challenges that force him to confront the layers of his personality, from the physical to the spiritual. At the outset of the novel Martel presents the spiritual and philosophical journey in these words:

"But one thing is clear: Atman seeks to realize Brahman, to be united with the Absolute, and it travels in the life on a pilgrimage where it is born and dies, and is born again, and dies again, and again, and again, until it manages to shed the sheaths that imprison it here below." (Life of Pi, 53-54)

The clear measured influence of India and the Vedantic philosophy which talks about the deeper understanding of the true self, the Atman is visible here and in most of the works of Martel.

The concentric journey of Pi through the Five sheaths is something that keeps him going. Instances of Pi's indulgence at the physiological level the outermost sheath i.e. the Annamaya kosh are seen in the part 1 as well as in part 2 of the book. In the 1st part when Pi lives with his family in India, he does not encounter any trouble to fulfil his physiological needs. He is a typical teenager engrossed in the luxuries of life. However, in the 2nd part with his struggle for existence, begins his needs to nurture his physical self. The outermost Kosh- Annamaya Kosh which is nourished with food, rest, thirst etc is making him fight for survival,

"I believe it was this that saved my life that morning, that I was quite literally dying of thirst. Now that the word had popped into my head I couldn't think of anything else, as if the word itself were salty and the more I thought of it, the worse the effect." (Life of Pi, Ch. 49 pr 7)

After the shipwreck Pi's first action done is to save himself from the tiger which is on the lifeboat. This transcends him through his first Kosh to the next one.

"I have never known a worse physical hell than this putrid taste and pasty feeling in the mouth, this unbearable pressure at the back of the throat, this sensation that my blood was turning to a thick syrup that barely flowed. Truly, by comparison, a tiger was nothing." (Life of Pi, Ch 49 pr 7)

Pi's indulgence to fulfil his physiological needs are more strongly felt by Pi Patel. He begins to think doing actions of fulfilling the same. His search for food and water to survive drives him through the difficult times.

"I had to drink now- or I would die. I could not find the desired instrument. But there was no time for useless distress. Action was needed." (Life of Pi, Ch 51 pr 14)

After fulfilling the first sheath moving to the next circle, a step closer to the vital self to the Pranamaya Kosh which emphasizes the vital life energy.

" I looked into the locker for food. I found cartons of Seven Oceans, Standard Emergency Ration, from faraway, exotic Bergen, Norway. The breakfast was to make up for nine missed meals....." (Life of Pi, Ch 51 pr 18)

Pi eats the food that contains animal fat, when in fact he is a vegetarian. Described in the novel, we are told that Pi Patel is a practicing Hindu who follows his Hindu teachings that forbids people to eat something having a soul. Pi even cries when he kills animals to satiate his needs. Pi even shows his feeling of fear. He defines the fear experienced by him in detail.

He confesses, " ...I was very afraid". Food and water become the major source to survive his body and soul. The Pranamaya Kos finds its resort in Kriya Shakti.

The mental sheath or the Manomaya Kosh is characterised by the power to will, the ability to wish. It strives for prosperity through the outward actions. This third Kosh is the last of the outer circle. In Maslow's words these three layers can be called as the 'basic needs'. The Manomaya Kosh also emphasizes mental wellness and is driven by Icchha Shakti. Pi's "need of company and comfort" expresses his need for mental wellbeing and emotional connect. This urge to be accompanied by someone makes Pi fascinate about the tiger, Richard Parker. He tends to develop an emotional connection with him. Pi realizes one thing that Richard Parker is very precious for him. It means that automatically Pi Patel is motivated to share love with Richard Parker, his acquaintance since childhood.

"It was Richard Parker who calmed me down. It is the irony of this story that the one who scared me witless to start with was the very same who brought me peace, purpose, I dare say even Wholeness." (Life of Pi, Ch 57 pr1)

It is quite interesting to observe the intermingling of all the five sheaths in a person. They seamlessly overlap and merge to be one. This gesture of love, friendship, compassion drive Pi towards the fourth inward sheath, Vijnamaya Kosh. Here begins the intellectual, Spiritual journey to the Atman. Pi after catering to all his vital needs for survival, through his connection with Richard Parker gradually more towards the inner self. This intellectual sheath guides an individual to attain inner perception to things, purity, self-discipline. The individual is dedicated to moral values and ethical thoughts free from instincts with the help of Gnyan Shakti. This is the experience which transcends the individual. Pi too is transcended by this time. He asserts, "animals have souls.. I have seen it in their eyes." He finds his true accompaniment in Richard Parker.

"I love you!" the words burst out pure and unfettered, infinite. The feeling flooded my chest. "Truly I do. I love you, Richard Parker. If I didn't have you now, I don't know what I would do. I don't think I would make it. No, I wouldn't, I would die f hopelessness. Don't give up, Richard Parker, don't give up. I'll get you to land, I promise, I promise!" (Life of Pi, Ch 86 last para)

Pi's belongingness of Richard Parker helps him achieve a newfound self-esteem. His desire for strength, achievement and renewed confidence is worth all the struggle. He asserts,

"I will not die. I refuse it. I will make it through this nightmare. I will beat the odds, as great as they are. I have survived so far miraculously. Now I will turn miracle into routine. The amazing will be seen every day. I will put in all the hard work necessary. Yes, so long as God is with me. I will not die. Amen. (Life of Pi, Ch 53)

Pi learnt the art of fishing, tamed Richard Parker and learnt the life lessons by applying his prior knowledge in order to 'beat the odds'. He even thanks lord Vishnu after fishing. He says,

"...against the wind, against the sinking of ships, against all circumstances that were working "Thank you, Lord Vishnu, Thank you!" I shouted." (Life of Pi, Ch 61 pr31)

Pi believes the fish to be a gift from lord Vishnu to help him in these difficult times and thanks him. The journey to inner self ends with complete Samarpan, the state of Paramanand the acceptance of the Ultimate truth and the joy of Ultimate happiness. This final state of the Anandamya Kosh facilitates the 'spiritual personality' to steadily bloom. When Pi is exposed to worsened situations while being on the lifeboat both he and Richard Parker suffer extensively. He declares, "I surrender. What more do you want?" He asserts the company of God in all of his difficult times in chapter 74.

"At such moments I tried to elevate myself. I would touch my turban I had made with the remnants of my shirt and I would say aloud, THIS IS GOD'S HAT! I would pat my pants and say aloud, THIS IS GOD'S ATTIRE! I would point to Richard Parker and say aloud, THIS IS

GOD'S CAT! I would point to the lifeboat and say aloud, THIS IS GOD'S ARK! I would spread my hands wide and say aloud, THESE ARE GOD'S WIDE ACRES! I would point at the sky and say aloud, THIS IS GOD'S EAR!" (Life of Pi, Ch 74 pr 2)

Pi reminds himself of being the Almighty's creation. His existence and everything that is around him belongs to God. He asserts that all that has happened to his life is God's will. Despite of being tested by the almighty, Pi retains his faith in the Supreme being which he sees in the form of "Jesus, Mary, Muhammad and Vishnu." The unceremonious parting away from his reflected self- Richard Parker saddens Pi. He says, "I was weeping because Richard Parker had left me unceremoniously." The attainment of the Anandamaya Kosh, state of Ananda- eternal peace, love and harmony transforms us from Sadehi to Videhi i.e. free from body or detached from the body. This supreme state of eternal bliss is beyond all kind of attachments and cravings. This keeps an individual involved with all but at the same time it is unattached to all. Pi is left completely transformed towards the end of this "Pilgrimage".

Conclusion

This overwhelming journey of Pi in Yann Martel's Life of Pi unfolds the journey of an individual to the inner self. These concentric sheaths of the Panchkoshs enveloping the soul ceremoniously shed after the exposure of an individual to unfavourable circumstances, lead him to the Absolute truth. This metaphysical journey of the lower self to the highest self develops on the person's level of consciousness, helping him in a better understanding of his own self. Seekers of human existence seamlessly find their answers to Ko Aham by shedding these sheaths or 'garments' enveloping the soul.

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