



Reconstructing Masculinity Through Emotion And Spirituality In Yann Martel's *Life Of Pi*

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Abstract

Using masculinity studies, especially R.W. Connell's hegemonic and alternative masculinities, this paper examines the construction of masculinities in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001) and focuses on how the novel subverts dominant masculine qualities in the survival narrative, such as physical and emotional repression, and rational control. Through Pi Patel's survival experience, the author examines the narrative structure, characterization, and symbolic elements of the text and employs the descriptive qualitative approach, close reading, and textual analysis. The results suggest that Pi embodies a hegemonic masculinity alternative that is emotionally expressive and spiritually concerned. Emotional and spiritual devotion, termed as religious is framed as a resilience and mental fortitude mechanism, not as weakness. The narrative reframes masculine identity by adding emotional and spiritual characteristics to the definition of survival. *Life of Pi* not only engages with hegemonic masculinity critically, but also offers a valuable and empowering contribution to contemporary literary discourse by portraying emotional and spiritual masculinity as alternative and viable masculinity in the field of masculine studies.

Keywords: masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, emotional masculinity, spirituality, *Life of Pi*

Abstrak

Dengan menggunakan studi maskulinitas, khususnya maskulinitas hegemonik dan alternatif R.W. Connell, artikel ini mengkaji konstruksi maskulinitas dalam novel *Life of Pi* (2001) karya Yann Martel dan berfokus pada bagaimana novel tersebut menumbangkan kualitas maskulin dominan dalam narasi bertahan hidup, seperti represi fisik dan emosional, serta kontrol rasional. Melalui pengalaman bertahan hidup Pi Patel, penulis mengkaji struktur naratif, karakterisasi, dan elemen simbolik teks serta menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, pembacaan cermat, dan analisis tekstual. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa Pi mewujudkan alternatif maskulinitas hegemonik yang ekspresif secara emosional dan peduli secara spiritual. Pengabdian emosional dan spiritual, yang disebut sebagai religius, dibingkai sebagai mekanisme ketahanan dan kekuatan mental, bukan sebagai kelemahan. Narasi tersebut membingkai ulang identitas maskulin dengan menambahkan karakteristik emosional dan spiritual pada definisi bertahan hidup. Novel *Life of Pi* tidak hanya mengkritisi maskulinitas hegemonik, tetapi juga menawarkan kontribusi yang berharga dan memberdayakan bagi wacana sastra kontemporer dengan menggambarkan maskulinitas emosional dan spiritual sebagai maskulinitas alternatif dan layak dalam bidang studi maskulinitas.

Kata kunci: maskulinitas, hegemoni maskulinitas, maskulinitas emosional, spiritualitas, *Life of Pi*

Introduction

Traditionally, literary portrayals of masculinity have emphasized a few dominant ideals such as physical power, rationality, and emotional control. These ideals legitimize male power and dominate other forms of manhood. In survival stories, male protagonists are often depicted as having to control and dominate their surroundings and to survive extreme emotional conditions, which are managed through emotional suppression. These portrayals align with what Connell calls *hegemonic masculinity*, the dominant form of masculinity in a particular culture that maintains the gender order by socializing certain masculine traits as normal and superior (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Hegemonic masculinity is not a characteristic of some individual men, but a broader pattern of social and cultural domination that legitimizes power, control, and a lack of emotion. Alternative masculinities, such as those characterized by emotional expression, need or spirituality are subordinated and made illegitimate (Jewkes and Morrell, 2012). Mainstream literary narratives are often the expression of typical masculine ideology of emotional control and dominance, and the exclusion of emotional expression and strong social bonds.

Unlike survival tales that give emphasis on physical overpowering and emotional toughness, Martel centered a dominant reconfiguration of masculinity in survival in the novel *Life of Pi* (2001). The survival story presents Pi, the protagonist, conquering the overwhelming physical threats of the natural environment using emotional strength, imagination and the spiritual faith in an overwhelming emotional and psychological environment of trauma and isolation. Pi's survival was through emotional storytelling and the practice of religion that counters hegemonic masculine norms through the expression of emotional vulnerability and introspective, and devotion spiritually.

Many scholars have viewed imagination and spirituality in the context of trauma as a form of coping that individuals use to negotiate their suffering, create meaning, and maintain their self-identity (Pargament, 1997, Whitehead, 2004). From this perspective, the way Pi relied on faith and narrative construction to create a story counters dominant hegemonic masculine ideals of emotional restraint and strength. The novel gives emphasis on emotional spirituality and survival.

Although the novel has enjoyed tremendous popularity and received considerable critical attention, most of the research available on *Life of Pi* appears to focus on the novel's spiritual allegory, the ambiguity of its narrative, and the postmodern elements of its narrative. The literature surrounding the novel's reconstruction of masculine identity is scarce. Thus, the current study attempts to fill this void by demonstrating how the emotional and spiritual dimensions of the narrative represent alternative forms of masculinity that contest hegemonic structures. In this regard, the paper intends to enrich the field of literary studies with specific regard to the recently evolving studies of masculinity and survival narratives.

This study contributes theoretically and academically to the discussions of masculinity in literary studies. It examines *Life of Pi* (2001) through the lens of hegemonic masculinity and, therefore, contributes to gender studies by emphasizing the much underestimated emotional endurance, the spirituality of high spirit (such as narrative imagination), and the restructuring of religious faith as a viable masculine

attribute. (Purwani, 2019). Thus, the study challenges the unyielding grip of ideal macho attributes of physical coercion, emotional mutism, and rational domination that support a patriarchal order and systematically extend the boundaries of literary imagination. (Nurdiana & Purwani, 2026)

This study exemplifies how the hegemonic concept of survival by the US sociologist Connell can be substantially enriched by eliminating the psychological and spiritual dimensions of survival narratives from the hegemonic masculinities lens. Investing the alternative masculine practices of Pi Patel, the study contributes to the understanding of the non-fixed and the non-unitary nature of the construct of masculinity. Therefore, this study contributes to the scholarship that aims to broaden the understanding of the construct of masculinity outside the hierarchical and exclusionary understanding of masculine norms.

This research identifies the prominent absence in the scholarship of *Life of Pi*, which has concentrated on the issues of spirituality, narrative ambiguity and the postmodern literary techniques, and has remained indifferent to the issues of masculine identity. Placing masculinity in the centre of analytical attention, the research opens up a new line of critique that will add to the already existing interpretations of the novel and enhance the richness of the literary discussion surrounding the novel.

Moreover, this study will offer an alternative lens for the analysis of male characters in survival narratives, to both scholars and students in literature, gender studies, and cultural studies (Purwani & Chelsia, 2025). This study examines the concepts of emotional and spiritual faith as positive masculine attributes, and proposes alternative, liberal readings of masculinity in literary texts. In doing so, it will address the critical deficit in the study of the representation of gender in literature, specifically contemporary literature.

Method

The research design of this study is qualitative descriptive design that incorporates textual analysis. The study is situated in the field of literary criticism focusing on gender studies and the theory of masculinity. A qualitative approach was taken in order to provide a complete analysis of the meaning and representation of the various discourses of masculinity in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001). The study is beyond measuring variables and focuses on articulating the emotional endurance, spirituality, and narrative imagination as forms of alternative masculinity that challenge the hegemonic masculinity.

The analysis of the text is primarily guided by the theory of hegemonic masculinity as proposed by R.W. Connell. In the context of survival narratives, this theory is used to map the dominant representations of masculinity as subverted and/or reconfigured by the experiences of the male protagonist in the novel.

The primary data source of this study is Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi* (2001). In literary studies, the human component is absent. Therefore, the sample is the selected narrative parts of the text, including the dialogues, inner voices, and descriptive passages of Pi Patel's experiences of survival, emotional struggle, spirituality and storytelling.

The selected quotations serve a particular purpose, being relevant to the research questions, especially the ones demonstrating emotional articulation, religious fervour, imaginative narration, and trauma response. Given the attention to one canonical text, it provides a detailed and focused analysis of the construction of masculinity regarding the survival literature.

The researcher acts as the primary research instrument in this study, which is common in qualitative literary research. To maintain consistency in analysis, a particular theory of hegemonic masculinity has been used to formulate the coding framework. The analytical instrument contains the following:

1. A set of analytical categories based on hegemonic masculinity theory; dominance, emotional restraint and control
2. Indicators of other forms of masculinity, which include emotional vulnerability, spiritual faith, narrative imagination, relational dependence.
3. A reading guide for classification and interpretation of relevant text excerpts.

These guides provide the framework for the consistent representation and analysis of masculine portrayals in the text. Thematic analysis of the text is the technique used in the analysis for this study. The method uses a detailed reading of the novel first, to find the narrative sections that involve the themes of masculinity and survival. These sections will be classified into hegemonic and alternative categories of masculinity. The analysis takes the following steps:

1. Repeated close reading of the novel in order to familiarize oneself with the data.
2. Classification of the text into hegemonic and alternative masculine categories.
3. Thematic analysis to explore the roles of emotional and spiritual elements as survival techniques.
4. Theoretical analysis to reconcile the findings of the text with the theory of hegemonic masculinity.

The various steps of analysis have shown that the novel *Life of Pi* breaks down hegemonic masculine ideals of survival narratives by including a portrayal of emotional endurance and spirituality as valid masculinity traits.

Result and Discussion

Result

The findings of a qualitative textual analysis of *Life of Pi* (Martel, 2001) are presented and how the novel reconstructs masculinity through emotional vulnerability and intimacy, spirituality, and the power of imagination. Unlike the dominant form of hegemonic masculinity as theorized by Connell (1995), which rewards control, emotional distance, autonomy, and rational mastery, Pi Patel represents a different form of masculine subjectivity based on the exposure of vulnerability, interconnection, and relationality. Three findings are presented:

1. Emotional exposure as masculine endurance

The first major finding suggests that *Life of Pi* sets a precedent by redefining emotional vulnerability as strength and, thereby, poses challenges to the dominant form of hegemonic masculinity. Asserts that hegemonic masculinity is anchored on the dismissal of the feminine, particularly emotional expressiveness, emotional interdependence, and act of control. However, Pi's

survival narrative foregrounds emotional vulnerability rather than emotional control (Connell, 1995).

Pi expresses grief and fear for the first time after he shipwrecked and lost his family:

"I was afraid. I was alone and orphaned, in the middle of the Pacific hanging on to an oar, with every expectation of being drowned or starved to death. Fear is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life." (Martel, 2001, p. 161)

This passage is important because it reframes fear not as a weakness to be overcome through masculine bravado or aggressive posturing, but as an existential concern that needs to be acknowledged and worked through. The masculine bravado in this case functions as a compensatory performance to cover up a vulnerability and, in this case, it suggests that not feeling fear is responsive to social expectations and not to psychological demands (Kimmel, 2006). Pi's masculinity is not in denial but in what could be called endurance or indeed *emotional resilience*. This directly challenges the hegemonic masculine ideal of emotional invulnerability as noted by Connell (1995).

Pi demonstrates emotional vulnerability as he mourns his family:

I wept like a child because I was a child. I wept because I had no mother or father, no brother, no sister, no country, no world left that made sense. (Martel, 2001, p. 170)

The hegemonic view of masculinity treats grieving as feminine and weak. In *Life of Pi*, losing someone and grieving for him is the right thing to do. It is the only thing that keeps Pi's self-intact and helps him avoid a psychological collapse. Penetrating the stigma around male vulnerability is complicated. MacArthur (2019) bemoans that men showing vulnerability risk stigma and devaluation. The stigma this study references is paired with the stigma of mental illness. Openly grieving and searching for help when mentally distressed is seen as weakness, causing men to suppress their psychological pain (Chatmon, 2020).

The novel constrains the definition of masculinity by stating that it is the ability to stay emotionally present, even under extreme pressure. It is a counter to Connell's proposition that hegemonic masculinity is characterized by emotional distance and self-control

2. Religious faith as a counter hegemonic resource

The second most important finding relates to how religious faith assisted Pi in his survival. Pi's faith can be seen as a resource to counter the hegemonic masculinity that flows through the entire novel. Connell (1995) suggests that the hegemonic masculinity is closely associated with rationality, autonomy, and control. Faith and spirituality on the other hand are seen as feminized or marginalized. Therefore, *Life of Pi* subverts the hierarchy by positioning faith as a disciplined and active practice.

While he is lost at sea, Pi spends a significant amount of time praying:

"I practiced religious rituals to keep despair at bay. I prayed regularly, meditating, chanting, reading holy books, speaking to God as though he were listening – because I believed he was." (Martel, 2001, 208)

This is not a description of the faith of a passive relinquishment. Faith in this case is the very demand of the active struggle. Pi's prayer is not a description of a routine as neglecting a mundane day to day obligation. Prayer is intended to set the structure of Pi's days, discipline his emotions, and anchor his sense of purpose. In this case, the expression of faith is the incorporation of fully spiritual commitment in an active sense. In this case, Pi's dependence on God is a contradiction to the ideal self-reliance masculine virtue that Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) describe as hegemonic.

Pi openly states that faith is central to surviving:

"Faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love - but sometimes it was also a lifeline, something to grab onto when the sea was too vast and indifferent." (Martel, 2001, p. 209)

This passage describes the faith problem as emotional vulnerability and a defensive tactic. Masculinity is reconstructed as not having the authority to control the ecosystem, but rather the relational interdependence with the ecosystem, God, the belief system, and the transcendent. This form of relational interdependence problematizes hegemonic masculinity's insistence on self-sufficiency and dominance.

3. Imaginative narrative as a trauma survival technique in *Life of Pi*

In this case, the third finding highlights the significance of narrative imagination as a central aspect of Pi's alternative masculinity. Connell (1995) points out that hegemonic masculinity is the privileging of rationality and factual power. On the other hand, the survival of Pi is dependent on the art of trauma storytelling and the use of imagination to transcend the negative impacts of trauma.

Towards the end of the novel, Pi offers the investigators two versions of his story and poses the question:

"Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?" (Martel, 2001, p. 352)

This excerpt emphasizes the importance of choice in constructing narratives and exercising agency. Instead of dominating through violence or an authoritative position, Pi exerts control through the construction of meaning. The narrative about animals is a proxy story that enabled Pi to carry his trauma without being overwhelmed by it.

Martel (2001) provides insight on the issue of interpretation as follows:

"The world is not just the way it is. It is how we understand it. And in understanding something, we bring something to it." (Martel, 2001, p. 297)

In this instance, the world becomes the domain of the imagination, and imaginative resources provide means to counter the dehumanizing effects of trauma. In this regard, imaginatively constructing the world is not a matter of masculine conquest but rather a matter of interpretive resilience.

Discussion

In this part of the paper, the author discusses the study's findings from the lens of the critique of masculinity, especially R. W. Connell's hegemonic and subordinate or alternative masculinities. In this section, the author will not just reconstruct the findings in the form of the evidence in the text. Instead, the author will explore how in the case of *Life of Pi* dominant conceptions of masculinity are reconstructed, especially through the character of Pi Patel and the way his emotional sensitivity, spiritual resilience, and narrative creativity function. The author addresses a number of critical episodes in the novel and illustrates how survival is redefined in the absence of emotional or psychological oppression or violence. In this way, the author communicates the novel's engagement with the restoration of the concepts of masculinity, trauma, and identity (Purwani, 2026) in contemporary survivalist literature.

1. *Life of Pi* and the Critique of Hegemonic Masculinity

When examined using Connell's framework, *Life of Pi* can be seen as an enduring critique of hegemonic masculinity. Connell (1995) posits that hegemonic masculinity has cultural power because it subordinates other forms of masculinity that are characterized by vulnerability, emotionality, and spirituality. Pi reflects those very characteristics, and yet he succeeds where hegemonic masculine ideals would fail.

For instance, instead of defeating the tiger, Pi practices an insightful form of coexistence. As he shares:

"It was not a question of him or me, but of us. I had to learn to live with Richard Parker, not defeat him" (Martel, 2001, 164).

This form of coexistence is a rejection of hierarchical forms of dominance that Lefèvre et al. (2012) describes as a hegemonic masculine ideal fantasy of supremacy. In this study, masculinity is relational and adaptive. This resonates with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) argument that masculinities are plural, relational, and context specific.

2. *Life of Pi* : Emotional Experiences and Ethical Masculinity

Martel illustrates an emotional sensitivity that is grounded in the ethics of a particular model of masculinity. In pondering the nature of despair, Pi states:

"Despair was a heavy blackness that settled over me. But I learned that despair is a sin, because it is a refusal to hope". (Martel, 2001, p. 209)

Instead of stoic endurance, having hope becomes Pi's moral imperative. This emotional openness allows Pi to remain morally intact through all of the suffering he endures. This is a direct contradiction to hegemonic masculinity's idea that emotional suppression is a sign of strength. That deeply embedded idea is not a thing of the past. It is prevalent in social interaction and cultural settings. Men are praised for being emotionally stoic while a social penalty is imposed for being vulnerable, thus reinforcing the existing power imbalance in the gender system. (Courtenay, 2000)

3. Faith, Storytelling, and Alternative Masculinity

Finally, Pi's faith and his ability to weave a story brings us back to the proposed alternative vision of masculinity in the novel. Pi concludes:

"So it goes with God. Which is the better story, the story with God or the story without God?" (Martel, 2001, p. 352)

The parallel between narrative imagination and religious belief suggests that masculinity is shaped by the stories men chose to live by. Pi's masculinity, in contrast to hegemonic masculinity's insistence on dominance and control is flexible, interpretive and humane. Several critics agree that Martel intentionally frames belief as a narrative choice, most clearly through the novel's invitation to choose "the better story", which places faith as an interpretive act instead of an irrefutable truth (Wagner, 2016). From this lens, religion is a narrative framework that Pi uses to make sense of his trauma and in that sense, the imagination Pi draws upon, which is not a tool of domination is a tool of reconstruction (Bogár & Szigethy, 2021).

Furthermore, the importance of religious symbolism and the multilayered narrative construction in critical studies is that it subverts hegemonic masculinity and the corresponding control, rational supremacy, and emotional suppression to challenge the dominant framework of religion and represent the 'soft' masculine traits of vulnerability, moral agency, and compassion (Govender, 2014). Accordingly, the flexible and humane construction of Pi's masculinity is a result of faith, belief, story, and the interpretative acts that challenge the hegemonic masculine narrative certainty.

4. Synthesis

The masculine traits exhibited in *Life of Pi* include emotional endurance, spiritual faith, and narrative imagination. These traits work as counter hegemonic masculine practices that facilitate survival in trauma. The novel reinforces Connell's argument through the character Pi Patel, where it suggests that the social and narrative constructions of masculinity can produce alternative masculinities that are potentially viable and even life sustaining.

Conclusion

The findings as a whole show that the *Life of Pi* articulates alternative masculine paradigms that challenge hegemonic normativity via emotional persistence, spirituality, and the construction of meaning through narratives. Addressing the first research question, the novel delineates fluidity and adaptability in the construction of masculine identity as a function of affective and psycho-spiritual strength, with no relation to dominative frameworks. This correlates with the contemporary theorization of masculinity where multiplicity and contextualization rather than dominative hierarchies fuel the discourse (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Anderson, 2009).

With regard to the second research question, the deviations of emotional expression, faith, and storytelling from the masculine norm is empirically justified and validated through the lens of empowerment. However, it is not a departure from the masculine norm of Pi's emotional expression. The emotional expression, rather, functions as a means of survival and prevents a breakdown of self. This is consistent with psychological theories that link emotional articulation with resilience and mental health (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Seidler, 2006). As is the case with emotional expression, spirituality functions as a masculine resource and enacts self-constraint

through the promotion of relational interdependence and rational self-absence (Park, 2010).

More generally, *Life of Pi* adds to literary scholarship by reassigning survival narratives not as gender reinforcement, but as gender renegotiation. While most survival fiction reiterates the masculinist ideologies of conquest and control, Martel's novel shows survival as dependent on one's interpretive pliability, emotional wisdom, and ethical creativity. This particularly aligns with the post-heroic discourses of masculinity, which suggest the primacy of non-dominance, vulnerability, and reflexivity (Howson, 2006; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

This makes the reconstruction of masculinity as the trauma of meaning making, the center of *Life of Pi* broadening the scope with which male identity may be constructed within the current literary space. The novel, therefore, not only engages with and critiques hegemonic masculinity, but also constructs a prototype of masculine subjectivity that possesses and is able to freely express emotional sensitivity, spirituality, faith, and narrative imagination. This is therefore articulated as a critical necessity within *Life of Pi* scholarship in positioning that the novel's ethical and philosophical inquiries centralising, rather, than marginalising, masculinity.

Several avenues impact future research and advocacy. First, subsequent studies may analyze alternative representations of masculinity in western and non-western survival literature. This may include cross cultural literature as it would lend insights into variations and similarities of culturally and religiously motivated masculine identities and survival psychologies.

Future studies of emotional endurance and spirituality as masculine resources may be productive by crossing literature and other disciplines, including psychology, trauma studies, and religious studies. Such frameworks would shed light on the interplay and tension of literary constructs of masculinity, and the social and psychological realms. Subsequent studies may wish to examine the reception of *Life of Pi* or its use in the teaching of literature. Student interpretations of Pi Patel's masculinity may provide insights into the use of literature as a means of constructing or deconstructing prevailing assumptions about gender (Rosita & Purwani, 2022).

Ultimately, scholars are invited to keep challenging the pervasive presence of hegemonic masculinity in literary criticism by further examining the practices of masculinity that are subordinated in the hierarchy or deviate from the norm. This way, literary studies can aid in the development of more inclusive and adaptable paradigms regarding the constitution of masculinity

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