

**SURVIVAL AS A TRIAL OF FAITH AND REASON: HUMAN–NATURE INTERPLAY
IN THE NOVELS OF DEFOE AND MARTEL****Makhmudova U.B.**

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Abstract: This article compares Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* with attention to how extreme natural environments—an uninhabited island and the Pacific Ocean—act as crucibles that test and transform the protagonists' faith and reason. It argues that while both texts stage survival as an ethical and epistemological trial, they deploy different narrative strategies: Defoe foregrounds pragmatic, providential self-fashioning that reconciles individual industry with Protestant teleology; Martel foregrounds pluralistic spirituality and narrative choice as instruments for meaning-making under duress. Together the novels illustrate divergent modern imaginaries of human agency, nature's alterity, and the role of story in sustaining life.

Keywords: Robinson Crusoe, Life of Pi, survival narrative, faith and reason, human–nature relationship, isolation, religious pluralism, postmodern storytelling, existential trial

Аннотация: В статье проводится сравнительный анализ романов Даниэля Дефо «Робинзон Крузо» и Янна Мартеля «Жизнь Пи» с акцентом на то, как экстремальные природные условия — необитаемый остров и Тихий океан — становятся испытанием, которое проверяет и преобразует веру и разум главных героев. Доказывается, что, хотя оба произведения изображают выживание как этическое и эпистемологическое испытание, они используют различные нарративные стратегии: Дефо акцентирует прагматичное, провиденциальное самостроительство, которое соединяет индивидуальное трудолюбие с протестантской телеологией; Мартель подчеркивает плюралистическую духовность и выбор повествовательной версии как инструменты придания смысла в условиях кризиса. Вместе эти романы иллюстрируют различные современные представления о человеческом агентстве, инаковости природы и роли истории в поддержании жизни.

Ключевые слова: Робинзон Крузо, Жизнь Пи, нарратив выживания, вера и разум, взаимоотношение человека и природы, изоляция, религиозный плюрализм, постмодернистское повествование, экзистенциальное испытание

Annotatsiya: Maqolada Daniel Defoening «Robinzon Kruzoz» va Yann Martelning «Pi hayoti» asarlari qiyosiy tahlil qilinadi. Unda e'tibor shunga qaratiladiki, o'ta og'ir tabiiy sharoitlar — kimsasiz orol va Tinch okeani — qahramonlarning iymoni va aqlini sinovdan o'tkazib, ularni o'zgartiruvchi omil sifatida namoyon bo'ladi. Tadqiqotda ta'kidlanishicha, har ikkala asarda ham omon qolish jarayoni axloqiy va bilishiy sinov sifatida tasvirlangan bo'lsa-da, ular turlicha narrativ strategiyalardan foydalanadi: Defo pragmatik, taqdirga bog'langan o'zini-o'zi shakllantirishni ilgari surib, shaxsiy mehnatsevarlikni protestant teleologiyasi bilan uyg'unlashtiradi; Martel esa diniy plyuralizm va voqelikni hikoya qilish variantlarini tanlash orqali inqiroz sharoitida hayotga ma'no berishni ko'rsatadi. Ushbu ikki roman zamonaviy tafakkurdagi inson agentligi, tabiatning o'ziga xosligi va hayotni davom ettirishda hikoyaning rolini turlicha talqin etadi.

Kalit so'zlar: Robinzon Kruzoz, Pi hayoti, omon qolish narrativi, iymon va aql, inson–tabiat munosabatlari, izolyatsiya, diniy plyuralizm, postmodern rivoyat, ekzistensial sinov

Introduction

Robinson Crusoe and Life of Pi belong to different historical and aesthetic traditions, yet both hinge on a prolonged confrontation between a human subject and a hostile natural environment. In each narrative, survival is not merely a physical struggle but an occasion for testing beliefs, rational capacities, and the moral imagination. Defoe's island functions as a space of imperial self-making and providential pedagogy; Martel's lifeboat functions as a liminal arena in which religious plurality and narrative choice become survival technologies. Examining these texts comparatively illuminates how fiction negotiates the uneasy boundary between faith and reason when human life is reduced to its barest contingencies.

Historical and generic contexts

Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe"—the early eighteenth-century "Robinsonade"—emerged in an era when Protestant providentialism, emergent capitalist ethics, and colonial expansion shaped English narrative models of individual mastery and improvement. Critics have long read Crusoe as a figure of practical rationality who progressively interprets his isolation through a providential lens, thereby converting calamity into moral and economic opportunity.[5]

Martel's "Life of Pi" is a twenty-first-century reconfiguration of the castaway narrative. It reframes survival through interwoven concerns: religious multiplicity, epistemological uncertainty (story vs. "objective" truth), and postmodern metafictional play. Martel retools the Robinsonade to interrogate how belief-systems and narrative forms operate as both psychological comforts and cognitive frameworks for making sense of trauma and loss.

Faith and reason in Robinson Crusoe

Defoe stages Crusoe's intellectual and spiritual progress as gradual and practical. Early in the text Crusoe responds to providential interpretation sporadically; over time, isolation catalyzes a disciplined routine of labor, reflection, and Bible-reading that fuse reasoned planning with religious self-understanding.[2] Crusoe's systematic adaptation—shelter-building, food-production, animal-keeping—functions as evidence of human reason's capacity to master environment, but Defoe frames that mastery within providence: industrious human action is rewarded and morally legible because it aligns with God's design. Scholarship has emphasized this dual register—where "reason" is not secular abstraction but instrumentalized within a religious teleology that legitimizes the colonial subject's dominion and self-reformation. Importantly, Crusoe's encounter with "Friday" and other alterities complicates simple readings of rational mastery: the novel stages encounters that expose the limits of Crusoe's assumptions about culture and humanity. Yet the text ultimately reintegrates these tensions into a narrative of conversion and moral ordering: survival produces an individual who is both practically skillful and spiritually reoriented.

Martel's protagonist, Piscine ("Pi") Patel, brings to his ordeal a distinctive interreligious sensibility—he practices Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam—while also possessing empirical curiosity about the natural world. Pi's survival depends on practical skill (rigging a small raft, rationing, animal husbandry aboard a lifeboat) and on habits of religious ritual that sustain his morale.[4] Unlike Crusoe, Pi foregrounds the coexistence of multiple faiths as a deliberate epistemic stance: faith functions less as a providential explanation of events than as a repertoire of rituals and narratives that furnish meaning and psychological resilience. Critics have argued that Martel uses this pluralism to suggest that stories—and the faiths that generate them—are instruments for negotiating traumatic contingency rather than literal accounts of cosmic order.[8] A central metafictional move in Life of Pi is the book's two competing versions of Pi's survival—one with animals and one with humans. Martel forces readers to choose which narrative they prefer; Pi's own remark "which is the better story?"—poses faith in stories as ethically consequential.[1] Here reason (demanding factual accuracy) and faith (willingness to accept symbolic truth) are set against one another, and survival is shown to entail an epistemic decision about how to inhabit experience after trauma.

In both novels, environment functions ambivalently: as destructive force that tests the body and will, as teacher that reveals human limitations, and as mirror reflecting inner moral states. Defoe's island is domesticated: Crusoe reshapes the land into a homestead, erecting a visible culture out of wilderness.[7] In doing so, Defoe articulates a model of human reason that conquers and civilizes nature—often read as consonant with early modern imperial ideology. Nevertheless, the island also exposes Crusoe to recurring moral tests that cannot be solved solely by technique—hence the narrative insistence on repentance, providence, and social ordering. Martel's ocean, by contrast, resists total domestication. The sea's immensity and the unpredictability of the lifeboat setting emphasize contingency and the fragility of human designs. Pi's relationship with nature oscillates between fear and wonder; his religious awe coexists with zoological pragmatism.[3] Martel's nature is not merely an enemy to be subdued but also an interlocutor that shapes Pi's ethical imagination: confronting a raw natural order—hunger, predation, death—Pi must renegotiate categories of compassion, culpability, and meaning. Both novels insist that survival requires practical knowledge—food, shelter, hygiene, animal management—but they diverge on what counts as the decisive “technology” of survival.[6] For Crusoe the decisive technology is labor disciplined by reason and justified by providence; for Pi it is the mutual reinforcement of ritual, storytelling, and empirical cunning. In Defoe, moral order is restored through reestablishing a social and religious framework; in Martel, moral understanding is an open-ended interpretive act that remains contested even after rescue. Thus “survival” in both novels is a compound achievement: bodily endurance plus the reconstruction (or reinvention) of meaning. For Crusoe the meaning is teleological and singular; for Pi it is pluralistic and elective.

Conclusion

Comparing Defoe and Martel foregrounds two literary responses to the perennial problem of how humans sustain themselves when stripped of social infrastructure. Robinson Crusoe models a modern confidence in reason allied to providence: survival is the stage on which industriousness and faith cohere into a settled identity. Life of Pi models a postmodern humility about certainties: survival requires pragmatic skills but also an admission that meaning often rests on chosen narratives and plural faiths. Together they testify to fiction's capacity to stage survival not only as bodily endurance but as an ethical and epistemic trial—one in which faith and reason must be continually negotiated.

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