



The Mind of a Tiger



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Animal interactions, social behavior and reactions to danger have always intrigued the human mind. Do they think the same way we do? Can they feel love, regret, anger, happiness or loneliness? Truly, an animal mind has always been a mystery to humans. In the novel *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, it tells a fascinating story of a boy who is stranded on a boat with a tiger, only to question readers when Pi provides another tale without animals that could have happen. The first story is full of instances and examples where animal behaviors are vividly described and portrayed during dire situations. However, readers often question and criticize this story because they find it hard to believe that a tiger would behave and act in the ways described in the novel. Some readers do not believe that a tiger and a human could ~~stay~~^{cohabit} together on a boat for 227 days and would rather believe the other story, one which sounds more believable, that is, the one

without the presence of a tiger. However, the vivid and detailed descriptions of social behaviors of the tiger (named Richard Parker) actually supports the idea that the events on the boat happened. The examples of Richard Parker in a social hierarchy, his reactions towards an

Thesis? It is not as clear cut and pronounced as it should be.

unfamiliar environment and his search for companionship are standard animal behaviors that can be proven.

Firstly, Richard Parker shows characteristics of being in a social hierarchy with Pi while he is on the boat. Although tigers are mostly territorial and solitary in nature, a newspaper article in 2006 at the Henghedaozi Feline Breeding Center in China has shown that Siberian tigers in captivity (where they are living together with other tigers) live in a social hierarchy consisting of certain alphas with others being restricted to a corner in the compound (“Captive Siberian Tigers Develop Social Hierarchy” *China.org*). This shows that tigers are capable of adhering to a social hierarchy even though they are usually solitary carnivores. One might argue however, that a single social hierarchy of animals ~~and~~^{with} humans might be impossible due to the difference in

species. On the other hand, animal trainers, particularly in circuses, have been training animals by establishing dominance over the animals time and time again as written in Fowler's *Restraint and Handling of Wild and Domestic Animals* (35). This indicates that the idea of a tiger sharing a single social hierarchy with a human is not impossible. In the novel, Pi resorts to training Richard Parker by establishing his authority and leadership through a variety of methods. He marks his territory on the boat by splashing urine over the tarpaulin and the locker lid (Martel 230) and further proves his superiority by making sure Richard Parker knows that Pi is the one giving him food by firstly feeding him then incessantly blowing his whistle to remind Richard Parker who provided him the food (Martel 249). Through these methods, Pi is able to put Richard Parker in a social rank below him. ~~As a summary,~~ ^{He} he does all these actions to establish his dominance over Richard Parker. Richard Parker would then adhere to his position in the hierarchy and not lash out or hurt Pi because the tiger is convinced that Pi is in a position of power, higher on the social hierarchy. This proves that a single social hierarchy among animals and humans is not impossible and Richard Parker's behavior on the boat is not something out of the ordinary. This indicates that the story on the boat with a tiger, reacting the way it is described in the novel, is a very real possibility.

Secondly, Richard Parker shows certain characteristics indicating that he might be experiencing the effects of being in a new and unfamiliar environment. Loneliness is often seen as the lack of social contact with other people (Peplau 1476). ^{Citation should occur at the end of the sentence.} ~~but~~ ^{However} in Richard Parker's case, it is the feeling of being overwhelmed in an unfamiliar environment that causes him to feel isolated and alone. Although the prime cause of loneliness is usually due to the lack of social interaction, studies have shown that people in a group or in a place full of people can still feel lonely (Peplau 1476). Loneliness has also been connected to being in "unfamiliar and impersonal surroundings"

(“Loneliness” *Lboro.ac.uk*). A person who has experienced loneliness, time and time again, could become shy or withdrawn from a crowd (Nakhoda *mdhil.com*). In the novel, Richard Parker frequently shows the same symptoms. For example, he isolates himself from the different animals by hiding under the tarpaulin, to the point that Pi states that he has failed to notice Richard Parker for two and a half days (Martel 178). Richard Parker is on a boat at sea, an environment he is very unfamiliar with, having been a zoo animal for almost his whole life (Martel 175-177). Some may attribute Richard Parker’s behavior to his unfamiliar surroundings. His reaction to the environment is what one would expect of an animal in an unfamiliar environment. One might state, however, that Richard Parker is an animal and the symptoms stated, as shown above, are based on studies on humans, not animals. On the other hand, how different are animals from us when faced with an adversity that both species can relate to? An article by Marian S. Dawkins, *Animal Minds and Animal Emotions*, states that animals are often able to express complex emotions that were thought to be specifically related to humans only (883-888). All of this indicates that Richard Parker could be feeling lonely due to the different surrounding, explaining his behaviors on the boat.

Excellent
defense.

Finally, signs of companionship and friendship between Richard Parker and Pi are frequently portrayed in the novel. Probably one of the most unbelievable parts of the novel, Richard Parker at times seems to be at peace with Pi, looking to him for friendship. In the novel, Richard Parker shows his contentment and friendliness towards Pi through his “prusten” calls towards Pi (Martel 218). Richard Parker does this not once, but twice. “I (Pi) shouted, “Hello, Richard Parker!” and I waved. He (Richard Parker) looked at me. He snorted or sneeze, neither word quite captures it. Prusten again.” (Martel 234) According to the *Journal of Mammalian Evolution*, the “prusten” call is a non-threatening call usually made between big cats when they

meet (Peters & Tonkin-Leyhausen 129-159). Readers tend to disbelieve^{ve} the first story told because the relationship between Pi and Richard Parker seems highly unlikely, as they do not believe that a tiger could be so close to a human. However, close bonds and friendships has always existed. More often than not, we would come across a story of unlikely relationships between animals and people. For example, the story of Christian the lion and his reunion with his owners after a period of separation. Instead of attacking them, the lion ran up to the owners to be petted and hugged even after being released into the wild for a long time (Johnston *Bbc.co.uk*). Evidently, a relationship between humans and animals is possible. It has happened before. Although unlikely, the possibility of Richard Parker looking towards Pi for company is there. An article by Lilly-Marlene Russow, *Ethical Implications of the Human-Animal Bond in the Laboratory*, states that “HAB (human-animal bonds) is, in paradigmatic cases, reciprocal and persistent. No matter how fond you are of an animal, if it does not recognize you, there is no bond in the strongest or paradigmatic sense” (34). Richard Parker feels lonely on the boat as^{it is} explain^{ed} and proven above. He could have looked towards Pi for company. Richard Parker’s “prusten” calls and the acknowledgement of Pi being in a higher social rank indicates that Richard Parker recognizes Pi. This shows that Richard Parker’s odd behaviors towards Pi on the boat can be explained.

On the whole, social behaviors portrayed by Richard Parker in Pi’s first account of survival brings cause to believe that the events on the boat were real and not fictitious. The possibility that Richard Parker participated in a single social platform with Pi which is not out of the ordinary. Secondly, Richard Parker portrayed expected behaviors of an animal trapped in an unknown and unfamiliar environment and finally, Richard Parker’s expressions of friendliness towards Pi^{are} ~~is~~ not something of fiction, but a reality. Readers often take the social behaviors that are shown by Richard Parker as unnatural. It goes against what readers think is “normal tiger

behavior”. However, with this research, it can be seen that these “unnatural” animal behaviors shown by Richard Parker are actually standard or possible behaviors if a tiger was on a boat. Richard Parker’s behaviors do not contradict with researched tiger behaviors, but are actually in line with what one can expect if there was a tiger as told in Pi’s first account of survival. In conclusion, these animal behaviors actually strengthen Pi’s first story, bringing cause to believe that the events on the boat actually happened, proving that the concept of truth is not bound, as Pi would say, something hard to believe (Martel 398).

[Great job. A breeze to read through.](#)

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