

# THE EFFECTS OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA TOWARD DISSOCIATION IN THE NOVEL *LIFE OF PI*

BY YANN MARTEL

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Abstract	Article Information
<p><i>This study poses two research questions. What form of childhood trauma is present in Yann Martel's novel Life of Pi? How did childhood trauma affect dissociation in the novel Life of Pi by Yann Martel? The aim of this research is to discover the forms of childhood trauma and analyze how childhood traumatism affects dissociation in Yann Martel's novel Life of Pi. Sigmund Freud and Martha Nassbaum's psychoanalysis theory serves as the basis for this study. The researcher employs a qualitative method, presenting the problem in a descriptive manner. The researchers gathered primary data from the novel Life of Pi, which they then analyzed and interpreted. In the final results of this study, the scientists found five types of trauma with 35 data points: Loss, Sadness, and Disappointment. The researchers discovered three types of dissociation: structural dissociations, secondary dissociations, and complex dissociations. These findings reveal a complex relationship between many types of trauma and dissociation reactions. Research demonstrates that childhood trauma significantly impacts the protagonist's psychological state, leading to various forms of dissociation that impact his perception of reality and identity. This study finds the result of the research are childhood trauma of loss affect strongly the structural dissociation and sadness of childhood trauma strongly affects secondary structural dissociation and the last disappointment dominantly complex dissociation. It conclude that childhood trauma affects seriously dissociation.</i></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Effect, Childhood Trauma, Dissociation, Psychoanalysis, Novel.</i></p>	<p><i>Received:</i> 12/02/2025</p> <p><i>Revised:</i> 22/02/2025</p> <p><i>Accepted:</i> 25/02/2025</p>

## INTRODUCTION

The environment in which a person grows up plays a crucial role in shaping their personality. A supportive childhood environment can foster emotional health and problem-

solving abilities. In contrast, growing up in a harmful environment—such as with abuse, illness, or family conflict—can hinder personality development and lead to psychological issues.

Repeated exposure to trauma, especially in childhood, often results in long-term mental health effects, such as depression or dissociation. Murray (2004) and D'Silva (2000) emphasize that trauma and child abuse are often unreported, leading children to repress their feelings, which later manifests as psychological problems. Studies (Chu & Dill, 1990; Nijenhuis et al., 1998) show a strong link between childhood trauma and dissociation, a coping mechanism where individuals disconnect from reality to endure emotional pain.

In *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, the protagonist, Pi Patel, experiences severe childhood trauma after surviving a shipwreck that kills his family. Throughout the novel, Pi exhibits symptoms of PTSD and dissociation, such as fragmented identity and altered perception of reality. His imagined interactions with a tiger reflect his psychological struggle to cope.

Freud (1900) and Van der Kolk (2015) both explain how childhood trauma can affect long-term mental functioning, with dissociation serving as the brain's defense against unbearable events. This research explores how *Life of Pi* reflects real-world psychological effects of trauma, bridging literature and psychology to better understand dissociation's roots in childhood experiences.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud**

Psychoanalysis is a scientific discipline that was established by Sigmund Freud and his colleagues to investigate the function and psychoanalytic behaviour of humans. Initially, the terms "psychoanalysis" were exclusively employed in conjunction with Freud. However, some of his disciples subsequently decide to develop or create his theory under alternative identities, including Alfred Adler and Carl Jung.

Sigmund Freud (1917) first discovered psychoanalysis while treating a patient diagnosed with hysteria. Freud's comprehension of the human personality is founded on his exhaustive reading of the diverse literature on science and humanity, his analysis of dreams, and his experiences with his patients. Freud contended that the fundamental issue originates in the psyche, rather than the corporeal.

The views of Sigmund Freud on trauma in childhood might provide a helpful structure for reading literature. Freud claimed that childhood trauma may manifest itself in numerous ways:

#### **1. Loss**

Traumatic events can result from profound loss, verbal violence, or treachery. For a person, the emotions brought on by the traumatic event might lead to substantial bodily and psychological reactions. This suggests that trauma, a rare occurrence, may occur after a significant loss, such as the loss of a family member, spouse, or a deeply connected individual.

## **2. Sadness**

Sadness is an emotional reaction to the feeling of loss or the impossibility to fulfil one's wishes. Often connected with a feeling of personal inadequacy or failure, Freud saw sorrow as a normal response to the sensation of deprivation or unmet needs.

## **3. Dissapointment**

According to Sigmund Freud, disappointment is the result of an individual's expectations or desires not being met by reality, resulting in a sense of dissatisfaction or disillusionment. Freud perceived disappointment as a psychological response to the failure of one's aspirations or ambitions, which can elicit emotional responses such as despair, frustration, or feelings of sorrow. People frequently employ defence mechanisms like rationalisation, denial, or displacement to mitigate the emotional consequences of this reaction, which often involve a conflict between their internal desires and external reality.

## **Dissociation by Howell**

Elizabeth F. Howell's structural dissociation theory, trauma, particularly in early infancy, results in the division of the personality into distinct components. These components, or self-states, consist of Apparently Normal Parts (ANPs) that operate on a daily basis and Emotional Parts (EPs) that store traumatic memories and emotions. With its own set of memories, emotions, and behaviours, each component functions in a semi-independent manner. An adaptive response to trauma, the theory posits that this division enables the individual to compartmentalise distressing experiences and preserve psychological stability. One of the objectives of therapy is to facilitate communication among these disparate components and to process traumatic memories in order to establish a cohesive self.

## **1. Structural Dissociation**

Structural dissociation is characterised by the development of distinct "self-states" or "ego states" within an individual, each of which possesses its own memories, emotions, and behaviours. These self-states can function semi-independently, frequently with a "apparently normal" component that oversees daily activities and functions, and distinct "traumatised" components that retain and process the repercussions of prior trauma.

## **2. Secondary Structural Dissociation**

In complex trauma cases, such as structural dissociation, there are multiple EPs, each of which contains distinct traumatic memories and associated emotional responses. Depending on the specific trauma memory that is being activated, the individual may experience acute and varied emotional reactions when these EPs are triggered independently.

### **3. Complex Dissociation**

Complex dissociation is a severe and chronic form of dissociation that is typically observed in individuals who have experienced protracted or repeated trauma. This condition is characterised by the presence of multiple dissociative states, each of which has its own unique identities, memories, and behaviours, resulting in a fragmented and unstable sense of self. The individual's memory, identity, and overall functioning can be significantly impaired by these dissociative states, which can make it difficult to maintain a cohesive understanding of oneself and one's experiences.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The type of research used was qualitative descriptive since the researcher of this study collected data in the form of sentences for the research's subject. By employing this method, the researcher aims to provide a comprehensive description and understanding of the issues present in the literary work under research. Through the collection and analysis of relevant textual data, this research seeks to offer valuable insights into the phenomena that occurred and the interactions between characters in society ultimately contributing to a deeper comprehension of the work as a whole. The researcher used both primary and secondary data sources in this study. *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel served as the primary source of data for this study, and data from books, websites, journals, theses, and articles, is how the researcher got the secondary data in this study.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **The Form of Childhood Trauma**

In this section, the researcher explains the form of childhood trauma such as Collective Loss, Sadness, and Dissapointment. The researcher found 35 excerpts.

#### **1. Loss**

The unconscious mind pushes traumatic experiences out of conscious awareness to shield the individual from emotional pain.

"Even though I was alone, I had the company of my memories. Those memories were my only comfort in those first days. I would replay the events of the past over and over, trying to understand them. But there were gaps holes in my memory that I couldn't fill. Some moments were just too painful, too incomprehensible, and I had pushed them away, out of reach." (Yann, 2001, p. 213).

This excerpt most certainly takes place either during or soon after Pi's sea adventure. The catastrophe, as well as the loss of his family and familiar life, exacerbate his battle with fractured memories. The allusion to revisiting previous events and the existence of memory

gaps emphasises his desire to make sense of his horrific experiences while handling the emotional weight of loss. This excerpt captures the protagonist's internal conflict with the trauma of loss and solitude, therefore stressing Freud's ideas on how such events could cause psychological problems and memory suppression.

## **2. Sadness**

Sadness is an affective reaction to the incapacity to fulfill one's aspirations or to experience loss.

“It’s odd how some memories are so clear while others seem to drift away. I have flashes of the worst moments, but they are always incomplete, as if my mind has intentionally left out the most harrowing details. It feels like my brain is protecting me from the full depth of what I endured.”  
(Yann, 2001, p. 258)

This excerpt most certainly takes place either during or soon after Pi's sea adventure. The severe solitude and anguish from the catastrophe, along with the loss of his family and familiar life, intensify his battle with fractured memories. References to recreating previous events and memory gaps highlight his struggle to make sense of his horrific circumstances while coping with the emotional weight of loss. Consistent with Freud's views on trauma and emotional suffering, the passage shows how suppression and defensive mechanisms affect the memories of the protagonist. Clear and fragmentary memories mirror the way the mind shields itself from the whole emotional weight of trauma, especially in cases of melancholy and extreme emotional pain.

## **3. Dissapointment**

disappointment, childhood development is influenced by unfulfilled demands and failures.

“I found myself obsessively cleaning and organizing the lifeboat, arranging every piece of equipment with meticulous care. It was as if by focusing on these tasks, I could channel my fear and frustration into something productive.” (Yann, 2001, p. 220)

This excerpt most likely takes place during Pi Patel's period of extreme uncertainty and worry due to his stranding at sea. One could interpret his obsessive focus on lifeboat organization and equipment as a coping strategy to manage his extreme emotions and the dire circumstances he finds himself in. Emphasizing these chores demonstrates an attempt to control anxiety and irritation through obsessive activity and escapism, thereby addressing the psychological effects of his traumatic event.

## **The Effects of Childhood Trauma Dissociation**

### **1. Structural Dissociation**

The concept that traumatic experiences can result in a fragmented sense of self, in which various aspects of identity or memory are compartmentalized.

"Even though I was alone, I had the company of my memories. Those memories were my only comfort in those first days. I would replay the events of the past over and over, trying to understand them. But there were gaps holes in my memory that I couldn't fill. Some moments were just too painful, too incomprehensible, and I had pushed them away, out of reach."  
(Yann, 2001, p. 213)

Pi considers in this excerpt how his recollections gave him some solace throughout his trauma, but he also notes voids in his memory of the events. He pushes these memories aside as he admits certain events are too terrible and unfathomable. This suggests a continuous struggle for him to make sense of his horrific events within the constraints and distortions in his memory. This shows Structural Dissociation: Pi's experience of "gaps" and "holes" in his memory fits Howell's idea of structural dissection. The inability to completely remember or combine certain unpleasant incidents points to a split in his psyche that keeps him from reaching and analyzing the most agonizing aspects of his experience. This fragmentation of memory and experience mirrors the dissociation process Howell describes, wherein distinct sections of the self may keep and control different pieces of trauma independently.

## **2. Secondary Structural Dissociation**

multifaceted form of dissociation that results in a fragmented identity with multiple distinct components, each with its own memories and emotions, as a result of ongoing trauma.

"It's odd how some memories are so clear while others seem to drift away. I have flashes of the worst moments, but they are always incomplete, as if my mind has intentionally left out the most harrowing details. It feels like my brain is protecting me from the full depth of what I endured."  
(Yann, 2001, p. 258)

In this excerpt, Pi's recollections of the horrific events differ. He has strong memories of certain events, while others seem broken or unfinished. His mind seems to be purposefully hiding the terrible and missing parts of his memories, implying a conscious attempt to save him from really facing the pain. This shows secondary dissociation; when first dissociation systems are insufficient to control persistent trauma, secondary states develop to address various facets of the trauma. Some memories' vividness and some others' incompleteness might mirror the functioning of these extra dissociative states.

## **3. Complex Dissociation**

A severe form of dissociation that results from protracted trauma and results in a substantial fragmentation of identity into multiple, distinct components.

“To cope with the unbearable reality of being alone at sea, I convinced myself that Richard Parker was just another member of the crew, someone I had to deal with in order to survive. This way, I could manage my fear and loneliness by focusing on our daily interactions.” (Yann, 2001, p. 105)

In this excerpt, Pi Patel finds himself in a lifeboat in the ocean alongside Richard Parker, a Bengal tiger. In order to handle the severe solitude and anxiety, Pi uses a cognitive approach to reinterpret Richard Parker as a simple crew member rather than a danger. Pi concentrates on useful interactions with the tiger, thereby helping him to regulate his strong feelings. This shows complex dissociation theory depicts Pi's development and use of specialized ego states to negotiate his painful event. Rereading Richard Parker as a crew member helps Pi build a conceptual framework that enables him to control his loneliness and anxiety and concentrate on survival chores. This method demonstrates the development, interaction, and adaptive use of complex dissociation states in response to trauma, thereby confirming Howell's hypothesis.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study indicates that childhood trauma profoundly influences the psychological development of the protagonist in Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi*. The research identifies and analyses five distinct categories of trauma loss, sorrow, regret, and anger, each of which contributes uniquely to the protagonist's dissociative experiences.

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