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## ***Wings of Fire: A Study in Intertextuality***

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Autobiography is a unique literary form, which blends fact with fiction in a subtle fashion. There is a lot of scope for the intertextual analysis of all sorts of autobiographical writings. Unfolding its rich intertextual mantle of quotations and connections, paraphrases and pieces, texts and contexts can be a rewarding and illuminating enterprise. The present paper attempts to analyze the well-known Indian English autobiography by APJ Abdul Kalam, *Wings of Fire*, with an assumption that every autobiographer- consciously or unconsciously- operates in the intertextual space formed out of the literature read by him/her.

A brief overview of the origin and development of intertextuality at the outset is essential to develop one's perception regarding its application. Derived from the Latin term *intertexto*, which means 'to intermingle while weaving', intertextuality promises to be a potent and prominent concept in modern literary theory. It is indeed one of the most influential intellectual terms that dominate contemporary critical theory. Coined and conceptualized by the French neo-structuralist Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s, it has remained a much debated term in literary and cultural studies because of its diverse interpretations. As Daniel Chandler points out,

Intertextuality does not seem to be simply a continuum on a single dimension and there does not seem to be a consensus about what dimensions we should be looking for. Intertextuality is not a feature of the text alone but of the 'contract' which reading it forges between its author(s) and reader(s) (Chandler 2002: 141).

At present, intertextuality "has come to have almost as many meanings as users, from those faithful to Kristeva's original version to those who simply use it as a stylish way of talking about allusion and influence" (Irwin 2004:228). It has been borrowed, transformed and utilized by so many critics and theorists that it is "in danger of meaning nothing more than whatever each particular critic wishes it to mean" (Allen 2000:2). Thus even today, it lacks a universally accepted mainstream definition. Despite this, there are some commonly shared assumptions and tenets which throw light on this critical concept.

A fairly convincing and comprehensive definition of intertextuality appears in the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1997), which describes it as "The need of one text to be read in the light of its allusions to and differences from the content or structure of other texts; the (allusive) relationship between esp. literary texts". Intertextuality thus basically denotes an *inborn* interconnection between all texts. It specifically refers to the ways in which one text leads to, evokes, is made from, and is intersected by others. It can be defined as the structural presence within a work of elements of earlier works. The notion of intertextuality involves a trace of the

ceaseless movement of various texts form spaces outside the body, to the ‘virtual’ library inside everyone’s mind. Thomas Greene rightly observes, “...since a literary text that draws nothing from its predecessors is inconceivable, intertextuality is a universal constant” (Greene 1988:10). Thus intertextuality implies the shaping of a text’s meaning by other texts. It is, in fact, a name given to the manner in which texts of all sorts (oral, visual, literary, virtual) contain references to other texts that have, in some ways, contributed to their production and signification. The intertextual theory, therefore, challenges the age-old assumption that every text is unique in itself and contains a stable, independent meaning. On the other hand, it presupposes the principle that every text is an *intertext*, because it is directly or indirectly related to a number of other texts.

The concept of intertextuality thus dramatically blurs the outlines of the book, dismantling its image of totality and self-sufficiency, and projecting it as an unbounded tissue of quotations and connections, paraphrases and pieces, texts and contexts. Michael Foucault makes a pedagogic proclamation:

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network... The book is not simply the object that one holds in hands... Its unity is variable and relative (Foucault 1974: 23).

Intertextuality underlines the hitherto overlooked fact that every text is framed by others in many ways. Most obvious and conspicuous are the formal or structural frames. One’s understanding of any text consciously or unconsciously relates to such framings. In other words, texts provide contexts within which other texts may be created or interpreted. These contexts are not only textual but also social. To interpret any text is, therefore, to trace its connection with those texts which are responsible for its being. “Among intertextuality’s most practical functions is (re)evaluation by means of comparison, counter-position and contrast” (Orr 2003:7).

Broadly speaking, intertextual relationship marks its presence in three modes:

1. **texts of quotation** which quote or allude to other literary or non-literary works;
2. **texts of imitation** which seek to parody, pastiche, paraphrase, ‘translate’ or supplant the original;
3. **genre texts** where identifiable shared clusters of codes and literary conventions are grouped together in recognizable patterns.

Jonathan Culler attempts a meticulous appraisal of this term:

Intertextuality has a double focus. On the one hand, it calls our attention to the importance of prior texts, insisting that the autonomy of texts is a misleading notion and that a work has the meaning it does only because certain things have previously been written. Yet so far as it focuses on intelligibility, on meaning, ‘intertextuality’ leads us to consider prior texts as contributions to a code which makes possible

the various effects of signification. Intertextuality thus becomes less a name for a work's relation to particular prior texts than a designation of its participation in the discursive space of culture: the relationship between a text and the various languages or signifying practices of a culture and its relation to those texts which articulate for it the possibilities of that culture... The study of intertextuality is thus not the investigation of sources and influences as traditionally conceived; it casts its net wider to include anonymous discursive practices, codes whose origins are lost, that makes possible the signifying practices of later texts... Intertextuality is the general discursive space that makes a text intelligible (Culler 2001:114).

The core principles and specific parameters of intertextuality emerge from the French intellectual scene of the late 1960s, which marks a transition from structuralism to post-structuralism. The 'canon' of French theorists of intertextuality includes the inventor of the term Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Gerard Genette, Michael Riffaterre and others. Of course, the contribution of the theorists outside France cannot be overlooked. The work of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin deserves special attention because, as Graham Allen rightly points out, "Julia Kristeva's attempt to combine Saussurean and Bakhtinian theories of language and literature produced the first articulation of intertextual theory" (Allen 2000: 3). Among others, the North American critic Harold Bloom is the most conspicuously dedicated theorist to a version of intertextual theory and practice.

*Wings of Fire*, an inspiring success story of Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen Abbdul Kalam, ranks among world's most popular autobiographies. First published in 1999, it is ready for its 36<sup>th</sup> impression in 2012. This stimulating account of the son of an ordinary boat-owner in a small island-town, who became a model and guiding force for millions of his countrymen, is truly a milestone in the history of Indian English literature. As M.S. Mukunda rightly recommends, "There is something that everybody can extract from this book... The book is worthy of being read by every Indian" (Mukunda 1999: 4). B.P. Chattopadhyay goes to the extent of calling it "a modern classic" and "a book worth its weight in gold" (Chattopadhyay 1999:11). Anand Parthasarthy's estimation regarding this autobiography is quite considerable. He calls it "a warm and intensely personal, deeply passionate story" and contends that "Kalam's personal story is a valuable document" which conveys a message "that Indians can be world-beaters, with no foreign training or degree. For this upbeat message alone, his autobiography is worth a 100 management tomes" (Parthasarty 1999:2). To quote B. Sharma, this book is "the first authentic volume on our (Indian) Space Odyssey" (Sharma 1999: 6).

Born in 1931 in Rameswaram, a well-known religious place in Tamil Nadu, Kalam has become "India's most distinguished living technocrat" (Parthasarty 1999:2). His career as a defense scientist brought for him the title of 'Missile Man' and turned out unparalleled in many ways. As the chief of 'Defense Research and Development Programme' (DRDO), Kalam demonstrated unique dynamism and resourcefulness. Without having any political influence, he could reach the topmost position of presidentship on his own merit. His five year tenure as the 11<sup>th</sup> President of India, from 2002 to 2007, attained incredible significance. He proved to be the first scientist to achieve this place of eminence. The secret of his success lies, in his own words, in his desire "to feel more, learn more, express more...to grow, improve purify, expand...to seek

more within myself...to look at how far I (have) still to go rather than how far I (have) come” (140). Despite receiving countless honours and prestigious awards, including the highest civilian award in India, the ‘Bharat Ratna’, Kalam has always been a down to earth person. As Arun Tiwari, the ‘compiler-writer’ of this book mentions in the ‘Preface’, “(Kalam) has an intuitive rapport with the humblest and simplest people, an indication of his own simplicity and innate spirituality” (IX). Throughout this book, the reader experiences in him an elderly companion and a father figure willing to share his gems of wisdom and treasure of worldly experience without any pretense or pomp. As Somasundari Latha observes, Kalam is “a combination of scientific endurance and human diligence who can inspire people in the world irrespective of age, caste, creed, religion and country” (Latha 2011: 25). Thus it successfully fulfills the anticipation voiced by Arun Tiwari: “Many of you may never meet Dr. Kalam in person, but I hope you will enjoy his company through this book, and that he will become your spiritual friend” (X).

The intertextual influence on *Wings of Fire* is quite potent and perspicuous. It tags on Genette’s concept of *architextuality*, which represents the relationship between a text and the genre it belongs to. Sometimes, Genette contends, this relationship is quite obvious. The present book fits into this category because architextuality is displayed in its title itself, printed on the cover as *Wings of Fire: An Autobiography*. True to the conventional framework of its genre, the book records its protagonist’s journey from adolescence to maturity, from obscurity to popularity. The structure of the book is typical and traditional. Its division into separate segments, too, is imitative of some of the classic autobiographies in English as well as Indian English literature viz. Mahatma Gandhi’s *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927). There are a number of photographs, covering the significant events in Kalam’s life.

Surprisingly and commendably enough, the autobiography opens with a hymn from *Atharva Veda*, the famous Hindu scripture, which sings the glory of God:

This earth is His, to Him belong those vast and boundless skies;  
Both seas within Him rest, and yet in that small pool He lies.

This quotation sets the tone of the entire narrative, which has a tint of spirituality. There are many such references which appear throughout this autobiography. When Kalam went to Mumbai to attend an interview at the INCOSPAR for the post of Rocket Engineer, he was under tremendous pressure. At that time, he mentions, “Lakshamana Sastry’s voice quoting from the *Bhagwad Gita* echoed in my ears” (31). Twice in the book, Kalam alludes to the *Holy Qu’ran* (on page no. 67 and at the beginning of ‘Contemplation’), demonstrating his faith in the Islam.

Kalam spent four years on St. Joseph’s campus. It was at the same time that he acquired “a taste for English literature”, which retained throughout his future life (14). In the ‘Epilogue’, Kalam acknowledges his mother’s greatness in a poetic fashion. There is a statement in this epilogue which is clearly an unconscious imitation of Robert Frost’s closing quatrain from his immortal poem, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*:

I remember the war days when life was challenge and toil-  
Miles to walk, hours before sunrise.

Kalam has Miltonic faith in God’s grace. He proclaims:



This is my belief that through difficulties and problems, God gives us the opportunity to grow. So when your hopes and dreams and goals are dashed, search among the wreckage, you may find a golden opportunity hidden in the ruins (140).

Throughout this autobiography, he seems to carry forward, in his own way, Milton's mission of justifying God's ways to man. That Kalam is considerably influenced by Milton's theist philosophy while going through his epic *Paradise Lost* is evident from the following excerpt: "As I see it, the earth is the most powerful and energetic planet. As John Milton puts it so beautifully in *Paradise Lost*, Book VIII:

What if the Sun  
Be centre to the World, and other stars...  
The planet earth, so steadfast though she seem,  
In sensibly three different motions move? (15)

Quite obviously, Kalam is more interested in reading poetry than any other genre of literature. That is why, majority of intertextual associations of this *Wings of Fire* are poetic. V K Krishna Menon, the then Defence Minister of India, chose Kalam the leader of a project team which had a mission to design and develop an indigenous hovercraft prototype as a Ground Equipment Machine (GEM). Many of his elder colleagues did not like this appointment. Out of envy, they made Kalam a target of fun and mockery. Their comments reminded him of "John Trowbridge's famous satirical poem on the Wright Brothers, published in 1896" (28). On hearing the news of his appointment as the Project Manager of a team to develop a Rocket Take-off System (RATO) for military aircraft, Kalam was "filled with many emotions- happiness, gratitude, a sense of fulfillment" and "these lines from a little-known poet of the nineteenth century crossed (his) mind:

For all your days prepare, and meet them ever alike  
When you are the anvil, bear; when you are the hammer, strike (51).

At the RATO project, Kalam was assisted by Capt. Narayan, who was a quite ambitious and enthusiastic person. Kalam remarks, "I often laughed at his impatience, and read for him these lines from T.S.Eliot's *Hollow Men*:

Between the conception and the creation,  
Between the emotion and the response,  
Falls the shadow (54).

Kalam and his team put their best for the success of the 'Devil' project. He reports: "In all, the results accomplished were outstanding, but we still had a long way to go. I recalled a school poem..." (75). Kalam found striking similarity between Dr. Brahm Prakash's advice to him and "Emerson's poem on Brahma" (97). After receiving the much-coveted Padma Bhushan, Kalam found that some of his close associates turned envious as they felt that he had been unduly singled out for recognition. To justify his innocence, he quotes the following lines from Lewis Carroll's poem:

You may charge me with murder or want of sense

But the slightest approach to pretence  
Was never among my crimes! (106)

Similarly, when he joined the DRDL, “the general mood and work tempo” reminded him of the often quoted lines from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s famous poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

Day after day, day after day  
We stuck, nor breath, nor motion;  
As idle as a painted ship  
Upon a painted ocean (111).

He refers to the same poem again, to indicate the poor rapport between the scientists working at DRDL (112).

Kalam firmly believes that every one of us has a divine internal power within ourselves. He holds that we sometimes get an opportunity to establish contacts with God, not directly, but “from an encounter with another person, from a word, a question, a gesture or even a look. Many a time, it could come even through a book...” (49). Kalam recounts an experience to show how he found the meaning of his existence and his goal in life accidentally through a book, when he had been to Delhi on an urgent meeting with Prof. Sarabhai:

I contacted Prof. Sarabhai’s secretary for an appointment and was asked to meet him at 3.30 a.m. at Hotel Ashoka...I decided to wait in a hotel lounge after I finished my dinner...I looked around the elegant lounge. Somebody had left a book on a nearby sofa...it was some popular book related to business management...Suddenly my eyes fell on a passage in the book, it was a quotation from George Bernard Shaw. The gist of the quote was that all reasonable men adapt themselves to the world. Only a few unreasonable ones persist in trying to adapt the world to themselves. All progress in the world depends on these unreasonable men and their innovative and often non-conformist actions (49).

Kalam indirectly acknowledges the influence of Khalil Gibran, the mystic writer, on his mind, when he argues, “I often read Khalil Gibran, and always find his words full of wisdom” (45). There is also a passing reference to the *Mahabharata*, the saga which is closer to every Indian heart. Kalam remarks that he chose “five Pandavas” who were “married to the Draupadi of positive thinking” to lead the five projects - ‘Prithvi’, ‘Trishul’, ‘Agni’, ‘Akash’ and ‘Nag’ - included under the ‘Guided Missile Development Programme’ (124). On his official visit to the USA, Kalam spared time to visit the Crystal Cathedral built by his “favourite author, Robert Schuller” (134). He cites two memorable statements by Schuller, which seem to have made a lasting impact on him: “God can do tremendous things through the person who doesn’t care about who gets the credit. The ego involvement must go” and “Before God trusts you with success, you have to prove yourself humble enough to handle the big prize” (134).

Apart from poems, religious scriptures and inspiring books, Kalam also alludes to few newspaper cartoons and a professional advertisement which represent the scathing criticism of the print media on the twice postponing of the launch of 'Agni':

*The Hindustan Times* showed a leader consoling press reporters, "There's no need for any alarm...it's purely peaceful, non-violent missile..." *The Hindu* carried a cartoon by Keshav, showing a villager counting some currency notes and commenting to another, "Yes, it's the compensation for moving away from my hut for the test site- a few more postponements and I can build a house of my own..." Another cartoonist designated 'Agni' as "IDBM- Intermittently Delayed Ballistic Missile". Amul's advertisement suggested that what 'Agni' needed to do was to use their butter as fuel! (150-51)

Thus, a close study of *Wings of Fire* proves the premise that every autobiographical text, though in a varying degree and extent, is in fact an intertext.

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