

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### PROBLEM AND SOLUTION METHOD OF NARRATIVE IN KALAM'S *Wings of Fire: An Autobiography*

A. Edwin JEEVARAJ  
Department of English, Anna University  
Chennai – 200 025,  
yedwin\_jeevaraj@yahoo.com

This paper aims to identify the problems and solutions prevailing in the educational and professional fields of India from Kalam's narration in *Wings of Fire: An Autobiography* (1999) which represents Kalam's personality and his service oriented mind. It reflects the key issues which according to Kalam are the barriers to personal growth and national development. It also depicts the strategies and ways that helped Kalam to overcome the barriers with the intentions that the strategies would create awareness about the future among the people and instil broad visions in them.

**Key words:** autobiography, narration, socialism, education, responsibility

#### **Introduction**

Donald E. Polkinghorne (1991) discusses five kinds of beginning-middle-end narrative episodes identified by Carr (1986). They are departure and arrival, departure and return, means and end, suspension and resolution, and problem and solution. Kalam constructs *Wings of Fire* with the problem and solution method of narrative. He registers the barriers of education, responsibility and the blockades to a nation's development. He identifies the problems, finds out the solutions out of his experience and shares them for the broad benefit of society. Kalam's conscious description of the problems and solutions through the selected incidents has direct contact with 'personal freedom' and the 'nation's freedom'. He designs the emplotment of *Wings of Fire*, as if it motivates every individual to endow his education and skills and to develop his

passion for 'personal responsibility. The plotment also visualizes how the problems of an individual, a village, a city, an institution and an organization became the problems of a nation and of humanity. This paper aims to identify the problems and solutions prevailing in the educational and professional field in India through Kalam's narration of his educational and professional career in *Wings of Fire*.

### **Barriers of Education and Solutions**

Generally, students' status of doubts, confusions, desire, questions, boldness, moral thinking, expectation, individuality, diversions, power and sensitivity create an 'evolution' in their inner mind. A common comment about evolution is: "but an evolutionary worldview has done nothing but added fuel to the fire." This given comment conveys a clear reflection that it has both positive and negative impact which may be 'the extreme level of any one of these two'. The negative impact would close the future doors of options, when a student attains the age of maturity to choose his specialization. It may motivate the students to take wrong decisions in their 'life deciding moments' and take the students' lives to negative or pathetic ends. It creates a dangerous situation, discomfort and makes each day of a person's life, a tough one. It is true that so many knowledgeable people who were unable to take right decisions at their earlier sensational moment keep on worrying about their present inability and think about the road not taken. In short, members of the affected group are merely leading their unsatisfactory lives for the sake of duty. Representing an ordinary middle class society, Kalam also crossed these situations and came out of them with the assistance of his observation skills and great dreams. In order to avoid future generations' evolution onto the negative path, Kalam gives his voice by bringing out the serious problems which stood as wrecking barriers to the educational growth and development of every individual and the nation in *Wings of Fire*. It shows the matured status of his service mind used for a broad benefit.

Ramakrishna Rao and Shalini Jayaprakash (2010) share many thoughts from Bama's (1992) *Karukku*. Bama, a writer in Tamil, is well-known for her writings *Karukku* (1992), *Sangati* (1994) and *Kusumbukkaran* (1996). Her writings are well known for representing her voice for her community of people, who are trying to climb up from a deep well, which has no steps or no ropes except some drenched and weak roots to the place of equality. Bama shows them a strong robe called education to attain equality in *Karukku*. Ramakrishna Rao and Sahlini Jayaprakash (2010) identify Bama, as if she "consciously tries to uplift the Dalit's self-respect and at the same time appeals

to them to realize the importance of educating themselves to elude all the forms of oppression” (p. 190). The same robe was also shown by Kalam to the poor and middle class village people as he became a victim of the communal partiality found in India during his childhood days.

The social and financial status of the students and their physical, mental and psychological changes and challenges are the problems that most often redirect the Indians and the educational status of India towards despondency. Having a rural village and minority communal background, Kalam represents the status of the lower middle class families of southern Tamil Nadu. In Kalam's (1999) words “... I was unaware of any other option for higher education. Nor did I have any information about career opportunities available to a student” and “...but admission to this prestigious institution was an expensive affair... and my father could not spare that much money” (p. 16) before he opts for an engineering education in MIT, Chennai clearly reveals the suppressed voice of every youth from the Indian villages. Kalam also faced problems due to his humble background, lack of standard sources and materials, communal partiality, homesick, unawareness, doubt and confusion about higher education and career opportunities, the act of procrastination, poor financial condition, lack of communication, internal and external changes, teachers' ill-treatment, etc., during his educational career. These problems at one time 'darkened his future'. Many students discontinue their course and negotiate to apply for higher education in the prestigious institutions, which produce worthy professionals and citizens due to these problems.

Kalam points out that his parents, relations and teachers helped him to overcome the problems through their motivation, care and help. Jainulabdeen, Kalam's father, counselled Kalam through mind diverting and hopeful words when Kalam felt homesick. Ashiamma's care, Jallaluddin's advice about 'the power of positive thinking' and Zohara's financial help by mortgaging her gold ornaments motivated Kalam to overcome his financial crisis and created awareness about education. The peculiar characteristics of his teachers shaped Kalam's inner mind. According to Kalam, Iyadurai Solomon handled the evolution of the student's mind wisely. Solomon explained to students the complex thoughts and the meaning of success in an easier way and instilled a sense of self and understanding in them. Through the voice of Lakshmana Sastry, Kalam (1999) says, “the teacher should not spread the poison of social inequality and communal intolerance in the minds of innocent children” (p. 9).

Prof. Sponder, Prof. K.A.V. Pandalai and Prof. Narasingha Rao from the Madras Institution of Technology (MIT) fed Kalam's intellectual hunger and shaped his thinking skills with their sheer brilliance, untiring zeal, and distinct personalities that form a strong foundation for Kalam's professional career. Prof. Sponder cleared Kalam's dilemma to opt for Aeronautical Engineering in

MIT by discontinuing B.Sc. Physics from St. Joseph's College, Trichy. Prof. Srinivasan, the Director of MIT treated Kalam to overcome the weakness called procrastination. The collective effort of his parents, immediate parents, teachers, mentors instilled a decisive mind and self-realization in Kalam. It helped him to overcome the setbacks, disappointments, distractions. It also raised him to attain the status where he decided his future confidently. As many students from the villages do not find Solomons, Sivasubramania Iyers, Jainullabudins, Jallaludins, Zoharas and the teachers and guides like Sponders and Srinivasans, their educational careers become a fruit of illusion that they can only dream their career but cannot touch and taste it.

### **Barriers of Responsibility and Solution**

Kalam also registers many obstacles he had during his professional career. The first director of the Vikram Sarabhai Space Research Centre (VSSC) and the person who played a major role in Kalam's life and in "the story of Indian science" (introduction), Dr. Brahm Prakash identified these obstacles as 'performance degraders'. Kalam (1999) reveals his motto of writing *Wings of Fire* as "Why not write about the victimization which is a hallmark of the tragedy of Indian science and technology?" (p. 168). This motto of Kalam pictures Kalam's nationalism which asks questions whenever he identifies the performance degraders of an individual, organization or the nation's growth. He brings the 'performance degraders' to light and shows "... the pathways to organizational success" (p. 168) through the description of his interview experience in the Directorate of Technical Development and Production DTD&P (Air), Indian Air Force and Indian Committee for Space Research (INSCOPAR) and his work experience in DTD&P (Air), VSSC, Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) and Defence Research and Development Laboratory (DRDL).

Kalam's narration reflects many individual and organizational drawbacks. He thinks of how the senior colleagues showed their envious attitude by discouraging Kalam's valid dream in DTD&P (Air). These colleagues with their meagre minds justified others and commented on others' work without doing their own work in order to prove their personal pride. Kalam also feels that he is not able to spend enough time to be a useful facilitator and a source of support to his team members. He registers the problems he had due to lack of manpower, skills, time, material procurement, technology support and insufficient knowledge. By remembering the words of Dr. Vikram Sarabhai who set a vision for SLV-3 and who interviewed Kalam in the Indian

Committee for Space Research (INCOPSAR), Kalam worries that India lacks a "single roof to carry out system integration for the rocket stages and systems" (p. 36). These are the root cause of the Pyro timer circuit failure. Kalam expects India to recognize achievers. Kalam appreciated the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) recognizing Tipu Sultan as a hero of warfare rocketry and regrets that India did not recognize Sultan. Kalam (1999) says, "The painting depicted a fact forgotten in Tipu's own country but commemorated here on the other side of the planet" (p. 38).

Kalam finds 'pride' a phenomenon that makes life in Indian organizations a thorny one, creates a partial situation among leaders, subordinates, workers and juniors and paves the way for abuse of human power and status. Kalam (1999) says, "... due to this contemptuous pride ... on one side are a few hundred 'heroes' keeping nine hundred and fifty million people down on the other side" (p. 38). He believes that man's pride is the root for all sin. He describes how pride injects a satanic character into man by recollecting the religious thought uttered by his mother in the bed time stories. Kalam expresses that the first disobedience done by Satan and man was due to their pride. Satan argued with God that he is superior to man as 'he was created from fire and the man from clay.' Adam and Eve ate forbidden fruit when they were tempted by Satan that the fruit will provide knowledge equal to that of God. Because of this 'pride', God cursed both Satan and man and threw them out of paradise. This is how man becomes Satan on earth.

Kalam points out many strategies to overcome these barriers. He accepts Dr. Brahm Prakash's words "You will require a tremendous amount of tolerance and patience" (p. 65) uttered before Kalam took charge as the Project Director for the SLV as the basic quality for a leader. Kalam admired Sarabhai for his analytical capacity, capability to re-define tasks in a short period, and attend the problems of the organization immediately and inculcate these qualities in him. He takes bold decisions to create opportunities for himself and the scientists to put forth their effort with complete dedication. He creates a space for collaborating with a few prestigious institutions and organizations of India. He learns the ability to manage the talented scientists for a noble cause. Moreover, Kalam's nationalism prompts him to ask "why not in India?" when he sees a development in a foreign country. This shows his heart that longs for the development of India. These are a few aspects that paved the path for the success of the Satellite Launch Vehicle (SLV-3) which was launched on 17th July 1980.

In the DRDL also, Kalam identifies the drawbacks and barriers of organizational growth and reveals them, in his works. Kalam (1999) says, "I have worked with many people and organizations and have had to deal with people, who were so full of their own limitations" (p. 168). He also has to face

the people who were “highly talented but egotistic and rebellious people”, who according to Kalam (1999) “would discuss matters very enthusiastically, but would finally accept what a select few said... and would unquestioningly believe in outside specialists” (p. 120). This defines the initial focus of Kalam in the DRDL. Kalam (1999) reveals the status of the DRDO scientists as “Many excellent professionals had not yet recovered from the disappointment” (p. 111). As a Project Leader, Kalam feels that lack of powerful and visionary leaders, funding, space availability and facilities like a wind tunnel, the task of selecting Project Directors among the go-getters, planners, mavericks, dictators and team men and the senior colleagues’ tempo of hopelessness created a stagnant situation in the DRDL. He explains the situations in the DRDL through the words of Coleridge as

Day after day, day after day

We struck, nor breath, nor motion;

As idle as a painted ship

Upon a painted ocean (p. 111)

In order to overcome the drawbacks, Kalam (1999) decided to bury the devil in the mind of the scientists of the DRDL and to involve follow-up action and decided to raise the hope and vision among them. Inspired by Sarabhai and Brahm Prakash, he searched for ways to build leaders ‘who could elucidate the goals’, could achieve the ‘missions larger than their lives’ and could ‘inspire their entire workforce’. (p. 112) Kalam (1999) also frames a set of rules to select the right type of leaders ‘who could clearly visualize the goal and channel the energy of the team members who would be working at different work centres in pursuit of their own individual goals’ (p. 121). Through hard work, he and his team set valuable goals and ambitions like involving in indigenous missile programs in order to get funding and co-operation from the government. Kalam (1999) arranged special lectures by the eminent personalities of prestigious institutions and organizations to install the goals like “the idea of India having her own missile systems” (p. 114) in the mind of the doubting Thomases, ‘who would unquestioningly believe in outside specialists’ (p. 120). Through the strategy ‘partnership’, he used the sources like Prof. S.M. Deshpande of the IISc., who found four bright young scientists working in the field of fluid dynamics and developed the software for Computational Fluid

Dynamics for Hypersonic Regimes within six months and Prof. I G Sharma of IISc., who developed a Missile Trajectory Simulation Software, ANUKALAPANA to evaluate the multi-target acquisition capabilities of an Akash-type weapon system. Kalam (1999) praised the achievement of the partnership of the eminent personalities. Kalam (1999) also adopted a “three-fold strategy – multi-institutional participation, the consortium approach and the empowering technology. These were the stones rubbed together to create Agni” (p. 148).

### **Conclusion**

Kalam converts this challenging place as a place of praise. This team successfully launched the Agni Satellite on 22 May 1989. Kalam was conferred the Padma Vibhushan award. After the Agni launch, Kalam (1999) expressed the status of the DRDL as “it was the first time in the history of India that so many scientists affiliated to the same organization found their names on the awards’ list” (p. 159). Kalam’s (1999) achievements uplifted India to be the sixth country in the world to explode a nuclear device. (p. 81)

### REFERENCES

- GUSDORF, George. ‘Conditions and Limits of Autobiography’ (1956) Transl. by James Olney, In OLNEY, James (Ed.) *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 28 – 48.
- JOLLY, Margareta. (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*. London, Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001.
- KALAM, Abdul Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen, TIWARI, Arun, Kumar. *Wings of Fire: An Autobiography*. Hyderabad: University Press, 1999.
- POLKINGHORNE Donald E. Narrative and Self Concept. In *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1991, Vol. 2&3, pp. 135 – 153.