

The Self and the Other in Kalam's *Wings of Fire*

A. Edwin Jeevaraj,

Visiting Faculty, School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Chanakya University,

Bangalore.

jeevaedwin@gmail.com

Abstract

Autobiographical writing, a form of life writing, involves the construction of an 'individual self' or a 'collective self' within a suitable narrative, often through first-person discourse. This narrative approach varies significantly among autobiographers, with differing methods of expressing identity. Some autobiographies frame the personal self as benefiting a larger societal segment, some present the "I" as a collective representative of a specific group, and some narratives emphasize an "I" shaped by individual effort alongside the roles played by others. An enquiry into the "I" and the "other" in the autobiographies helps us to explore the unique identity of the autobiographer, the way he views society to uncover the socio-cultural context, and to understand how individual narratives contribute to larger historical and cultural contexts. Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the former President of India, exemplifies this third narrative style. In his autobiography, *Wings of Fire*, Kalam generously acknowledges the contributions of others who played significant roles in his journey from a national to a global visionary. He speaks about the 'other' that is constructive as well as positive. His autobiography is post-modern and compelling due to its subjectivity and its evaluation in a challenging environment. Therefore, this research paper examines the interplay between the self and the other in Kalam's *Wings of Fire* through textual analysis, and theories and concepts related to autobiographical consciousness, identity, memory, language, and autobiographical narrative. It aims to answer questions such as: How does Kalam construct his identity in *Wings of Fire*? In what ways does he incorporate the contributions of others into his narrative? How does his unique approach to autobiographical writing contribute to the genre?

Keywords: The Self and the Other, Autobiographical Consciousness, Identity, Memory, Autobiographical Narrative

1. Introduction

The current global political landscape reflects a world where nations assert their supremacy, promoting a narrative of power and exclusivity. This "othering" occurs within and among nations, as the political entities implement stringent policies to establish their dominance. However, voices of many countries have demonstrated that a nation's identity is not singular but composed of multiple selves. Similarly, the global identity is not defined by a single nation or a select group of nations but by all the nations of the world. The prevailing situation underscores the collective strength of democratic principles, emphasizing the universal value of each individual's voice. Moreover, growth and development have blurred the distinctions between national and global identities, despite efforts by various institutions to polarize people and nations based on traditional divisive ideologies.

Literature and other forms of expression have long challenged the notion of singular identity through various critical discourses, including racism, Dalit studies, feminism, queer studies, eco-criticism, liberal humanism, and post-colonialism. These disciplines advocate for the recognition of plurality within human existence. Recent literary works and research on post-humanism highlight the importance of "others". Autobiographical writing, a subset of life writing, involves constructing either an individual or a collective identity through narrative, often in the first person.

Life writing is a popular literary genre of non-fictional studies. Autobiography, biography, memoir, confession, diary, travelogue, bildungsroman, epistolary, hagiography, testimony, illness narrative, autobiographical fiction, collective biography, and collaborative autobiography are various forms of Life Writing. Autobiography is a popular form of life writing in which a writer writes about their life. Many elements shape the seriousness of an autobiography, such as its purpose, time, and language. For Philip Lejeune, an autobiographer needs to focus on the development of his or her life (Qtd. in Anderson, 2001). For Olshen, an autobiographer should portray his or her creative achievements with a focus on isolating the uniqueness of the autobiographer's subjectivity (Olshen, BN, 2001). For Pascal, an autobiographer should maintain his or her seriousness in his or her role as an author (Qtd. in Anderson, 2001). For McAdams, an autobiographer should articulate the events that shaped his or her life or his or her sense of self (McAdams, 1996). For Baxter, the material for an autobiography should come from the heart, one that is filled with love for fellow human beings (Baxter: Sutherland 1969).

Gusdorf traces the autobiographer's consciousness of self, crucial narrative design, and the representative moments that shaped his or her personality in an autobiography (Qtd. in Anderson, 2001).

The genre of autobiography faces significant challenges in the post-modern context, as it blurs the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, raises doubts about the truthful representation of the self, and questions the reliability of referential language. Naik elucidates this paradox by highlighting the indistinguishable roles of the writer and the subject in autobiography (D G Naik, 1962). The dual function of the autobiographer as both character and author complicates the narrative, as these roles coexist within the same person's memory, the primary source of the autobiographical material. Lejeune critiques the concept of 'intentionality' as the link connecting the author, narrator, and protagonist in an autobiography (Anderson, 2001). Self-examination, described by Naik as "the ability to view oneself critically," is a rare quality and a measure of the autobiographer's honesty. Paul de Man links the autobiographical experience to a "revolving door," suggesting that the author's intention is more closely tied to their own experiences than to true self-revelation (de Man, 1979; Anderson, 2001). Poststructuralists, such as Brockmeier, argue that the fluid and fluctuating nature of identity leads to issues of referentiality (Brockmeier, 2001). Kalam's *Wings of Fire: An Autobiography* faces additional issues, as it is a collaborative autobiography in which the roles of the writer and the narrator in portraying subjectivity are undefinable. Smith and Watson agree with Derrida's context that an autobiographical narrative should not be a self-centred narrative (Smith & Watson, 2001).

The narrative approach varies among autobiographers; some focus on the impact of the individual self on broader society, others present the "I" as a representative of a particular community, and some emphasize the individual's growth through collective effort. Writers who adopt the third approach often demonstrate a generous acknowledgment of others' contributions. Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, the former President of India, exemplifies this third narrative style in writing *Wings of Fire*, his autobiography. *Wings of Fire* reflects his unique personality, which stands out not only for its content but also for its contribution to the genre. It opens multiple spaces for examination, such as its form as an autobiography / collaborative autobiography, its position within postcolonial autobiography, and the roles and representations of the character, narrator, and writer, etc.

Another notable perspective is an examination of the representation of the self and the other in *Wings of Fire*. In it, Kalam consistently recognizes the influential roles of others in shaping his identity, which extends beyond national boundaries to encompass humanity. Moreover, Kalam's background and his socio-economic and political position invite us to analyse how Kalam depicts his self and the other in his autobiography.

2. Literature Review: Self and Other in Autobiographies

The construction of the 'self' and the 'other' varies significantly among writers, particularly among Indian women autobiographers. From Rassundari Devi to Sudha Murthy, these writers narrate the experiences of an empowered or dejected 'self' navigating the obstacles created by patriarchy, society, and nations. Their identity constructions range from representational to individual and collective. Despite different approaches, their narratives function as soft power resisting hard power, with the weak revolting against the strong, emotions challenging intellects, and nature opposing culture to claim its place and respect. In these narratives, the power of the 'self' is contingent on the 'powers of the other' they challenge.

Authentication of the 'self' in autobiographies is problematic because the writer and narrator share the same identity. Autobiographical critics examine how autobiographers critically view their selves, and present their views objectively in their autobiographies. Williams addresses this issue by evaluating the presentation of the self and others in selected autobiographies, suggesting that treating the past self as 'other' from the present perspective provides a critical viewpoint for reliable self-examination (Williams, 2019). This method allows autobiographers to reflect on their past selves with a sense of detachment, enabling more objective introspection. Mahatma Gandhi, though elaborates on his associations with his mentors, and movements that he initiated for the freedom of his nation in *My Experiments with Truth*, did not fail to narrate the traumatic experiences he went through while facing the situations that tested his moral dilemma. (Gandhi, 1993).

Kamala Das's *My Story* exemplifies a confessional and revolutionary voice, discussing marital issues, extramarital affairs, and complex sexual experiences that women of her time hesitated to discuss publicly (Kamala Das, 1973). This is akin to the Western tradition of confessional autobiographies, such as St. Augustine's *Confessions*. In such autobiographies, the intention is to overcome past traumas by confessing and thereby distancing the present self from the past.

In contrast, marginalized writers treat the ‘other’ differently as they receive inhuman treatment from society. Their voices often reflect the consequences of societal ‘othering’ and claim their rightful place and respect. Ambedkar’s *Waiting for a Visa* vividly portrays the dominant society’s treatment of the voiceless Dalits, highlighting the oppressive practice of Dalitisation. Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs* (2009) depicts society’s caste-based and gender-based violence against poor Dalit women, employing a collective voice to underscore systemic oppression (Pawar, 2009). Similarly, Frederick Douglass’s personal narratives detail the history of abolitionism and the harsh realities of slavery and racial discrimination as an African American (Douglass, 1845). Nancy Morejon’s autobiographical poem *Black Woman* speaks about the trifold suppression of a Cuban American ‘other’ under the hands of Whites as

The Master bought me in the square.
I embroidered the Master’s coat and I gave birth to his son.
My son did not have a name.
And the Master died by the hand of an impeccable English lord.
I wandered. (Nancy Morejon, 2002)

She presents her ‘self’ as a tormented, troubled soul due to ‘othering,’ demanding fair and humanistic treatment. Despite being first-person narratives, these works are inherently collective, reflecting broader social injustices.

Philosophically, the relationship between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ is essential for understanding human existence and our relationship with the world. Sartre posits that the self and the other are in constant conflict, each seeking freedom from the other’s hold (Sartre, 1989). Ursula Tidd examines the ethical self-other relationship in Simone de Beauvoir’s autobiography, finding that Beauvoir views the self and the other as interconnected and responsible for each other’s freedom, thus producing collective responsibility and reciprocal intersubjectivities. Tidd also identifies Hegel as having a similar view regarding the ethical relationship between self and others (Tidd, 1999). In *Writing the Self versus Writing the Other: Comparing Autobiographical and Life History Data*, Maines addresses critical issues related to writing about the self and the other. He argues that life writing must understand life itself and maintain a clear ‘social distance’ between the writer and the subject (Maines, 2000). Ayodeji’s examination of J. P. Clark’s autotravography *America, Their America* explores how Clark navigates cultural compromises between the self and the other (Ayodeji, 2021).

Thus, the construction of the self and the other in autobiographies is a complex interplay of personal and societal narratives. Indian women autobiographers, marginalized writers, and confessional autobiographers each bring unique perspectives that challenge societal norms and claim their identities against the backdrop of the other. These narratives underscore the interconnectedness of self and others, highlighting the ongoing struggle for self-realization and social justice. Rarely, researchers focus on reading the self and others presented in Indian autobiographies. Such readings are assumed to make significant contributions to studying the self, society, and beyond. Kalam wrote *Wings of Fire* (1999) and *Turning Points* (2007) during a time when India was reimagining and reconstructing its identity in the era of globalization, shedding its past, and promoting itself as a superior power on par with other developed countries. However, there are internal pressing issues that were acting as performance degraders in the process. In such a situation, an ordinary poor man from a Marakkar family of Rameshwaram, who later became the President of India, recollects his life in *Wings of Fire* and in *Turning Points*. It should not have been an ordinary journey. He has much to say because he became a notable and prominent figure in the world through his invaluable contributions to the nation, as his achievements are related to India's signature in space, and humanity in the form of projects, service, speeches, and writings. What would he speak about his 'self', how would he see the 'other'?, and what incidents from his life would he include in his autobiography, and why? Has he followed the conventional way to write his autobiography? How unique is his autobiography? All these questions bring many perspectives to approach his Autobiography. Among them, the present research aims to analyse how a good human being known for optimism, modesty, and secularism, who was tested by personal trials and dilemmas, critical circumstances, and envious people, and visionaries, would record the 'self' and 'other' through a textual analysis and a few theoretical backdrop of self, identity and memory.

3. Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach for its study. It evaluates the self and others in *Wings of Fire* using concepts and theories related to self, autobiographical consciousness, identity, memory, language, and narrative. Olshen describes the self as a subjective structure belonging to the individual who experiences and possesses knowledge about his lived life and perspective (Olshen, 2001). Autobiographical consciousness is linked to how one perceives the self and others across various life stages, offering insights about the writer's awareness of social, cultural, political, economic, and technological contexts. Researchers also examine this, analyzing the position of the autobiographers, asking how the autobiographers evaluate

their ‘self’; whether they glorify themselves or present their selves after a thorough, truthful, and critical examination without any political or negative intent. Brockmeier defines identity as a recurring theme that runs throughout a person's life and narratives, prompting autobiographers to explore questions about their identity and life story. To construct his identity, an autobiographer attempts to do an inward search to find the answers to questions such as “Who is he?”, “Who are others?”, “What is he at present?”, “How did he become like this?”, “What type of person does he believe?” (Brockmeier, 2001). Bamberg emphasizes that identities are formed through interactions in social contexts such as family, education, and work. Memory serves as a source for autobiographical material, and memory theories evaluate the authenticity of these sources, posing questions about the events remembered and their significance (Bamberg, 2009). Nelson and Fivush highlight that language acquisition fundamentally changes the ability to understand and express inner thoughts and emotions, forming the basis of autobiographical consciousness (Nelson, K. & Fivush, R., 2019). While memory facilitates introspection, language provides a means of expression, with intention playing a crucial role in the presentation of the self in an autobiography. Narratives are the interface between the internal and the external; they structure our cognitive understanding of the external world, and they structure our subjective consciousness. Cultures and stories coevolved, each reciprocally defining the other, and in the process defining the self (McAdams, 1996). Keeping this understanding as a backdrop, this research analyses *Wings of Fire*.

4. The Self and the Other in Kalam’s *Wings of Fire*

Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam found it challenging to fully capture his subjectivity in writing, viewing the human self as complex and mythical. He provides “a bird’s-eye view of his life” (Kalam, 1999), reflecting his modesty and initial reluctance to write an autobiography. He uncovered abundant material through retrospection but needed specific actants to organize his narrative. He focused on motivating children from rural and economically unstable backgrounds, those lacking self-confidence, and individuals seeking guidance, so he preferred to use incidents from his life and simple language that ordinary people could understand. But the autobiographical form, Kalam’s position in the vantage point of his life, the significance of his life, the ambiguous self, and his complex philosophy of life and humanity compelled him to opt for a narrative that should serve multiple purposes beyond self-expression and simple language. Thus, the narrative records India’s significant achievements in space, connects his contributions with historical context, expresses gratitude to those who shaped his life, and reflects the contemporary environment of his work. By blending conventional autobiographical and postcolonial narratives, Kalam

uniquely portrays his subjective structure. He chronicles his life in the first person, culminating in India's entry into space history and breaking free from colonial constraints. He also employed various agents that critiqued the problems of the people and the nation, which act as performance degraders and prevent India from entering the list of developed countries. He shows some role models who intervened in his life for a total transformation, and he also showed his life as a model as an example for bringing changes in the lives of ignorant and potential intellectuals who were hesitant to contribute, keeping the social norms in the backdrop and standing as a barrier to the nation's development. His autobiographical consciousness gathers material that serves to build a unified national self, to help the ignorant understand the real power of every individual, and to emphasize the importance of humanity over personal identity. For this purpose, he draws upon his own life, which is deeply interlinked with the self, the nation, and humanity.

Kalam's retrospection in *Wings of Fire* reflects the multiple jets of stories from his autobiographical consciousness and reaches back to where it began, the matured self that is involved in the act of remembering. He knew who he was and who the others were. He primarily aimed to motivate a large pool of Indians who were aimlessly leading a meaningless life. Thus, he selected the incidents and events from his life to highlight a series of problems that every individual, society, and nation undergoes and he provided suggestions and solutions. Indecisiveness, distractions, procrastination, lack of self-awareness, courage, and self-motivation etc., are common problems of individuals and society. They pose serious and irreparable damage and losses. Kalam believed that problems are unavoidable but solvable through personal efforts. Failing to do so will create stagnancy of movement, which will spoil the purity of the element and the expansion of the human self. One has to believe in his or her strength, and with that, one should push the body and spirit beyond the expectations of the present moment.

D G Naik suggests self-examination as one of the important features of a good autobiography. It was this self-examination with which Kalam understands his condition and searches for solutions to the problems from within and from outside. Kalam's entire narrative in *Wings of Fire* serves as answers to the questions that he has and the questions that the world poses. One of the prominent figures in India, known for his unstoppable resilience, Kalam expressed a deep sense of self-awareness and internal motivation in *Wings of Fire*. Reflecting on his early days as a young scientist, he stated,

"Looking back on my days as a young scientist, I am aware that one of the most constant and powerful urges I experienced was my desire to be more than what I was at that moment. I desired to grow, improve, purify, expand... All I had was the inner urge to seek more within myself. The

key to my motivation has always been to look at how far I had still to go rather than how far I had come. After all, what is life but a mixture of unsolved problems, ambiguous victories, and amorphous defeats? The trouble is that we often analyze life instead of dealing with it" (Kalam, 1999; 140).

These words, spoken by Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, hold significant meaning due to the time in which they were uttered. They reveal Kalam's trust in himself during a period of mixed emotions and challenges. By then, he had already contributed to the successful launch of the SLV-3, a source of national pride. At the same time, he was involved in the Defence Research and Development Laboratory (DRDL) working on the Prithvi missile project, a collaborative effort involving scientists from ADE, DTD&P (Air), ISRO, and DRDL. This was a challenging period for Kalam, characterized by a lacklustre environment with limited resources and uncooperative, envious, aimless, and lethargic people.

Instead of withdrawing, Kalam drew strength from his past experiences and identified principles that had previously worked well for him. He demonstrated that the path one has traversed holds answers to many future questions. Ultimately, he made numerous decisions that transformed the entire environment, engaging people in the noble cause of the nation, and he achieved remarkable success. His reflections also highlight how brilliantly Kalam weaves his recollections into his narrative, making it captivating and insightful.

This utterance also clearly indicates Kalam's brilliance in locating the core substance of his consciousness in his narrative. This unique way of narrative functions in many ways beyond connecting the past with the present to the future. To design the future of the DRDL, as a Director, he looks back on his experience as one of the creators and gains new insights that helped to transform an unproductive environment into a productive one. It also reflects the autobiographical model suggested by Herman, Hutto, and Katherine Nelson et.al. (2019). They expect the autobiographical narrative to register "the mind (that) extends over a time such that earlier beliefs, desires, emotions, and thoughts may still influence current behavior for both self and other and also that individuals' beliefs, desires, emotions and thoughts may change over time" (Herman, 2007; Hutto, 2012; & Katherine Nelson et.al., 2019). He, as a motivator, motivated himself and the outside world, too.

According to Smith and Watson, ‘agency’ is an important aspect of autobiography as it has significant roles to play. For Smith and Watson, an autobiography should reveal an “agency” or “the desire for agency” to show how meanings are created for people, how people create meanings for themselves and how people engage the world around them (Smith & Watson 2001). A.P.J. Abdul Kalam’s inner self is shaped by his subjective consciousness and profound spiritual orientation, reflecting a deep understanding of the dual nature of any experience. He uses the analogy of an electron, which can appear as a particle or a wave depending on the observer's perspective, to illustrate his belief that meaning is subjective and open to interpretation. Throughout his narrative, Kalam recounts moments of confusion where he struggled to make decisions. In such times, he relied on a "special effort of the will" to stay resilient, choosing possibility over impossibility, optimism over pessimism, trust over disbelief, and success over failure. His life demonstrates that self-formation is not defined by static ideals, but by evolving personal choices. This belief is evident in his words: “Happiness, satisfaction, and success in life depend on making the right choices, the winning choices” (Kalam, 1999). His autobiographical account reveals a personal choice deeply grounded in spirituality, always focused on the well-being of the nation and his fellow humans.

Kalam recollects incidents that are significant as they do not boast his glory, but they reflect how they added a sense of self in him and helped him to recognize his inner personality and strength, to bring his best, with which he faced the criticality of time, and to build up his personality. For example, Kalam recalls a significant episode from his time at MIT, when he had an encounter with Prof. Srinivasan, then the Director of MIT. As he describes:

"One day, my design teacher, Prof. Srinivasan, then the Director of MIT, reviewed my progress and declared it dismal and disappointing. I offered a dozen excuses for the delay, but none of them impressed Prof. Srinivasan. I finally pleaded for a month’s time to complete the task. The Professor looked at me for some time and said, 'Look, young man, today is Friday afternoon....' He said, 'I knew I was putting you under stress and asking you to meet an impossible deadline. I never expected you to perform so well'" (Kalam, 1999).

For Kalam, this experience was more significant than all his other academic encounters at MIT, as it highlighted a critical aspect of his personal growth. The incident illustrates the unique working culture at MIT, shaped by Prof. Srinivasan’s distinct pedagogical style.

By intentionally placing Kalam under immense pressure, Srinivasan aimed to push him beyond what he believed were his limits. This strategy, though seemingly harsh, was designed to bring out the best in the student, forcing him to transcend his perceived capabilities.

When a student approaches learning with humility and a flexible mindset, even seemingly insurmountable challenges can be overcome. In Kalam's case, his willingness to learn and his tireless effort enabled him to exceed his professor's expectations. This moment became a pivotal turning point in Kalam's life, revealing to him his inner strength and untapped potential. He realized that he possessed the resilience to endure life's challenges and could drive himself toward achieving what had once seemed impossible. Prof. Srinivasan's approach, while tough, acted as a catalyst for the expansion of Kalam's self-awareness, transforming his view of his abilities and potential. The incident is a profound example of how external pressure, when applied thoughtfully, can lead to significant self-discovery and personal growth, blurring the boundary between self and other as the student's self-development becomes interwoven with the guidance of the mentor.

Kalam recorded the role of others in his life through a dualistic lens. His mentors such as his father Jainullabuddin, Iyadurai Solomon, Prof. Dhawan, and Prof. Sarabhai are portrayed as "performance promoters," embracing dualism by seeing failures as opportunities for growth and innovation. These figures nurtured and inspired Kalam, encouraging him to pursue transformation, even when faced with setbacks. He internalized their teachings and integrated their positive attributes into his evolving sense of self. This reflective process of analysis and integration helped him navigate moments of emotional uncertainty. In contrast, there were distant observers who criticized Kalam during his failures, representing external pressures that contributed to shaping his autobiographical identity. His response to criticism was guided by the understanding that both appreciation and judgment are vital for personal development. Kalam distinguishes between two types of "others" in his life: those who are closely connected to him, who trusted and supported him, and those who observed him from afar, often with criticism. Yet, he remained optimistic, seeing value in both perspectives. His spiritual self acted as an agency to transcend the negative impulses of pride and vengeance, focusing instead on growth, collaboration, and national progress.

Abdul Kalam presents a narrative shaped by the dynamic between the self and the other, with Vikram Sarabhai serving as a pivotal "other" in shaping his identity. Kalam viewed his association with Sarabhai not merely as a professional relationship but as a significant encounter that profoundly influenced his self-conception and sense of purpose. Sarabhai's innate wisdom and astute vision represented an external

source of inspiration, which Kalam absorbed and internalized. Sarabhai's clear-sighted visions for India became, for Kalam, the ultimate purpose driving his scientific endeavors. Through his interactions with Sarabhai, Kalam's sense of self expanded beyond personal ambitions to embody a collective mission for the nation's progress. This aligns with Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, wherein the self is constructed through the internalization of the other's values and actions, forming a continuous dialogue between self-perception and external influences (Ricoeur, P., 1992)

Kalam recounts an incident that highlights Sarabhai's calm leadership and visionary approach:

“... We requested Prof. Sarabhai to formally activate the pyro system through a timer circuit. Prof. Sarabhai smiled and pressed the button. To our horror, nothing happened. We were dumbstruck. I looked at Pramod Kale, who had designed and integrated the timer circuit. In a flash, each of us mentally went through an analysis of the failure. We requested Prof. Sarabhai to wait for a few minutes, then we detached the timer device, giving a direct connection to the pyros. Prof. Sarabhai pressed the button again. The pyros were fired, and the nose cone was jettisoned. Prof. Sarabhai congratulated Kale and me, but his expression suggested that his thoughts were elsewhere. We could not guess what was on his mind. The suspense did not last for long, and I got a call from Prof. Sarabhai's secretary to meet him after dinner for an important discussion” (Kalam, 1999).

This moment reveals not only Sarabhai's patience and futuristic vision but also the way in which the other (Sarabhai) cultivated a deep sense of responsibility and composure within Kalam. It was also through this sustained exposure to Sarabhai's leadership qualities that Kalam's own sense of leadership and purpose evolved. The self, represented by Kalam, becomes inextricably linked to the other, Sarabhai, as Kalam's actions, decisions, and leadership in DRDL mirrored many of Sarabhai's strategies. By placing Sarabhai's vision above personal desires and even attending meetings at 3:00 am, Kalam demonstrated how the self is shaped through the prioritization and adoption of the other's ideals for a greater cause. In this narrative, Sarabhai is not simply a mentor but a fundamental aspect of Kalam's autobiographical consciousness. Kalam can sense the innate wisdom and individuality of each person he meets, interacts with, and encounters, and inculcates those qualities in him. His belief in secularism encouraged him to move away from boundaries to pursue the truth. He expanded his sense of self by including the good from others. His desires are broad but practical.

Kalam's narrative also illustrates how his inspired self becomes a source of strength and guidance for others, even amidst overwhelming challenges and setbacks. The Agni missile project serves as a testament to this dynamic, where Kalam not only confronts external hurdles such as envious nations, critical media, and uncooperative weather but also internal struggles—working with a diverse team of 2000 scientists, each with varying degrees of commitment and skepticism.

Kalam's autobiographical narrative reflects his autobiographical consciousness and his self that is formed through interaction with the external world. His sense of self evolves as he navigates various agents, his own resilience and dynamics, and the influence of others—such as colleagues, public opinion, and broader social forces. The challenges he faced were not merely technical but deeply personal. His working environment was not feasible when he took charge. It was filled with different groups of workers: the committed, the apathetic, the detractors, and the envious. Except for the committed workers, others as performance degraders, were actively criticising and discouraging the teams. As a result, the working environment seems externally active, but the progress remained stagnant. Kalam uses the lines from Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to aptly capture the stagnation Kalam felt during the project:

“Day after day, day after day,

We struck, nor breath, nor motion;

As idle as a painted ship

Upon a painted ocean.” (Kalam, 1999)

This metaphor symbolizes the inertia within the project's environment, where progress seemed impossible. These dynamics illustrate the "otherness" Kalam must grapple with, not just from outside forces but from within his immediate professional circle. Yet, it was precisely here that Kalam's self emerged as the driving force of inspiration, transforming the immovable into movement. Still, Kalam and the entire team were struck by the failure of the Agni launch on 20 April 1989. They have to abort the launch due to technical difficulties. The consequences rippled in DRDL and across the nation and the world. The entire team would face the echoes of the voices of the outside and inside. Kalam remembers the press 'another other' and its harsh comments on the failure as,

The press was up in arms and filled with various interpretations of the postponement of the flight to suit the fancies of the readership. Cartoonist Sudhir Dar sketched a shopkeeper returning a product to the salesman, saying that, like Agni, it would not take off. Another cartoonist showed an Agni scientist explaining that the launch was postponed because the press did not make contact. The Hindustan Times showed a leader consoling press reporters, “There is no need for any alarm...it is purely peaceful non-violent missile” (Kalam, 1999).

However, instead of succumbing to this negativity, Kalam redirected the energy into motivation, addressing the scientists: “*The country does not deserve anything less than success from us. Let us aim for success*” (Kalam, 1999). This illustrates his ability to turn the harsh scrutiny of the "other" into fuel for self-reflection and collective progress. His resilience and refusal to submit to criticism, whether from the press or envious nations, shaped him as a leader who could inspire his team to move beyond failure. Ultimately, Kalam's self becomes a vessel for inspiring others. He shifts the narrative from despair to hope, channeling not only his inner resources but also the collaborative spirit of those around him, rebuilding the team's faith in their shared mission. His leadership reflects a self deeply connected to the other, yet powerful enough to transcend and transform the obstacles posed by both. This dynamic is central to the success of the Agni launch on 22 May 1989, marking a victory not just for technology, but for human will and collective effort.

Kalam's remark after the success of Agni launch is so significant as it tells us what ‘Agni’ really means to Kalam. It was the pride of Kalam, the scientists behind it, and India too. Kalam wrote thus,

The success of Agni
“Do not look at Agni
....
It is a fire
In the heart of an Indian
....
Burning pride of the nation
And this is bright. (Kalam, 1999)

Kalam's poetical lines prove how Kalam's self is jelled with the self of the nation, which needs a fruitful integration of the committed and dedicated beings that hold the nation higher than the personal self.

A diamond allows the outside light to penetrate into it, get enlightened from within, and reflects the enlightenment in multiple dimensions with multiple colours.

Kalam's narrative includes incidents from his childhood experience, academic life, from family history, and reveals that he became aware of the external world's realities only as he matured. In his narrations, Kalam reflects on the impact of India's freedom struggle and the world wars on his remote hometown of Rameshwaram, in southern Tamil Nadu. Besides this, Kalam intentionally includes incidents to depict the socio-political conditions of his time. For example, one day, his teacher, Sivasubramania Iyer, invited him to his home for a meal. The narrative goes like this;

"His wife was horrified at the idea of a Muslim boy being invited to dine in her ritually pure kitchen. She refused to serve me in her kitchen. Sivasubramanian Iyer was not perturbed, nor did he get angry with his wife, but instead, served me with his own hands and sat down beside me to eat his meal. His wife watched us from behind the kitchen door. I wondered whether she had observed any difference in the way I ate rice, drank water or cleaned the floor after the meal. When I was leaving his house, Sivasubramania Iyer invited me to join him for dinner again the next weekend. Observing my hesitation, he told me not to get upset, saying, 'Once you decide to change the system, such problems have to be confronted.' When I visited his house the next week. Sivasubramania Iyer's wife took me inside her kitchen and served me food with her own hands" (Kalam, 1999).

This incident highlights the social strata used for "othering" and "exclusion" from fair treatment. Initially, Kalam portrays a secular environment where his father Jainullabuddin and Iyer converse freely about spiritual matters. However, he also exposes the societal practices of discrimination based on caste and religion. These practices do not significantly affect Kalam, as he does not think the way society does. His concerns lie beyond societal acceptance, focusing instead on individual development and service to the nation. Over time, these practices began to change, with Sivasubramania Iyer depicted as a revolutionary working to eradicate caste and religious discrimination. Initially, Iyer's wife humiliates Kalam for his identity but eventually changes her attitude when she sees Kalam's respect for their family values. This episode of Kalam's childhood life reveals the direct or indirect dialogue between Kalam and Iyer's wife and witnesses how a conversation or encounter between two cultures results in understanding, changes, and inclusion. It also illustrates how Kalam used agencies to express his concern.

Kalam's narrative also deconstructs society's generic codes. It shows how Kalam exemplified a deep sense of equality, treating everyone with respect, regardless of rank or position. His ability to endure, adapt, and persevere in the face of challenges, combined with his self-awareness, self-determination, and love for humanity, earned him the admiration of all who worked with him. For Kalam, hierarchies meant little; he treated everyone with the same regard. This sense of equality is evident in a poignant moment from his life. On Republic Day in 1990, when Kalam received the prestigious Padma Vibhushan award alongside J.C. Bhattacharya and R.N. Arunachalam, he took a moment to remember and express gratitude not only to his parents, teachers, guides, and directors but also to the mess bearer who brought him breakfast each day. On that special day, the mess bearer brought Kalam his usual breakfast of idlis and buttermilk, offering a silent smile of congratulations. Touched by the gesture, Kalam referred to him as his "countryman," showing that in his eyes, every individual was deserving of the same respect, regardless of their role or status.

Finally, Kalam was acutely aware of his physical appearance and personality, understanding that society often values outward appearances over inner qualities. He recognized that society has long judged individuals based on superficial identity tags, which have remained constant for millennia. Those who uphold this system may go to great lengths to suppress any challenges to it, ensuring it appears inclusive while still restricting opportunities and rights. Contrary to this societal code, Kalam believed that an individual's true self is internal. He supported this belief with an anecdote involving former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. When an unplanned meeting with Gandhi left him feeling unprepared, she reassured him by saying, "You are beautifully clothed with your success," (Kalam, 1999), highlighting that his inner achievements mattered more than his external appearance. It means society's codes are generic, but it is an individual's way of approaching his or her self that shapes their identity.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Wings of Fire* offers a profound exploration of the dynamic interplay between the self and the other, revealing how Kalam's identity transcended personal boundaries to merge with the larger identity of the nation. It reflects him as a humble being, whose spirit was sparked by others, now sparking others, and a philanthropist who transforms the shade thrown on him into light. He not only believed "I think therefore, I am" but also, he believed "I am, because we are". As an egalitarian, he respected the fundamental rights of everyone. He sees a silver lining in every cloud. He takes the best from every mind. He focuses on his strength, notable virtues, as well as those of others, and makes life worth living. *Wing of*

Fire projects his selfless action without attachment to personal gain. His reflections on the Agni launch, encapsulated in the poetic lines "Do not look at Agni / It is a fire / In the heart of an Indian...", evoke the burning pride not only of an individual but of a collective national consciousness. This powerful metaphor demonstrates how Kalam's self became inextricably linked to the aspirations and dignity of India. Furthermore, his encounter with Indira Gandhi illustrates his belief that true identity lies within, in one's internal achievements rather than external appearance. Gandhi's words, "You are beautifully clothed with your success," underscore the importance of recognizing the self not through society's superficial judgments, but through the authenticity of inner accomplishment. Thus, Kalam's narrative is a testament to how an individual can inspire and shape the collective by reflecting the enlightened self that, like a diamond, allows the light to penetrate, transforming it into a spectrum of brilliance for all to see. This integration of self and nation exemplifies the autobiographical consciousness at the heart of *Wings of Fire*, where personal identity and national identity are intertwined in a shared vision of progress.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, L. (2001). *Autobiography*. Routledge.
- Ambedkar, B. R. (1990). *Waiting for a Visa*. (Original work published 1943). Bharat Bhushan Press.
- Ayodeji, O. (2021). J. P. Clark's autotravography America, their America. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 59(3), 411-426.
- Augustine, S. (1991). *Confessions* (H. Chadwick, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- Bamberg, M. (2009). Identity and narration. In P. Huhn, J. Pier, W. Schmid, & J. Schönert (Eds.), *The living handbook of narratology* (pp. 132-143). Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG.
- Brockmeier, J. (2001). Identity. In M. Jolly (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of life writing: Autobiographical and biographical forms* (pp. 455-456). Routledge.
- Douglass, F. (1845). *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave*. USA.
- Gandhi, M. K. (1993). *My experiments with Truth: An Autobiography* (M. Desai, Trans.). Beacon Press.
- Kalam, A. P. J. A., & Tiwari, A. K. (1999). *Wings of fire: An autobiography*. Universities Press.
- Das, K. (1973). *My story*. Sterling Publishers.
- Nelson, K., & Fivush, R. (2019). The Development of Autobiographical Memory, Autobiographical Narratives, and Autobiographical Consciousness. *Psychological Reports*, 123(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033294119852574>
- Morejón, N. (2002). Black woman. In *Cuban poetry of revolution*.
- Maines, D. R. (2000). Writing the Self Versus Writing the Other: Comparing Autobiographical and Life History Data. *Symbolic Interaction*, 23(4), 435-458.
- McAdams, D. P. (1996). *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Naik, D. G. (1962). *Arts of Autobiography*. Vidarbha Marathwada Book Company.
- Olshen, B. N. (2001). The self. In M. Jolly (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of life writing: Autobiographical and biographical forms* (pp. 799-801). Routledge.
- Pawar, U. (2009). *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*. Columbia University Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1989). *Being and Nothingness*. Washington Square Press.
- Smith, S., & Watson, J. (2001). *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Sutherland, J. (1969). *English Literature of the Late Seventeenth Century*. Oxford University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1992). *Oneself as Another* (K. Blamey, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.

Tidd, U. (1999). Beauvoir's Ethical Self-Other Relationship. *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, 15, 163-174.

Williams, J. (2019). *Evaluating the Presentation of Self and Others in autobiographies*. Routledge.