



## Identifying the Characteristics of Motivational Non-Fiction in Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's *The Wings of Fire*

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.3.353](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.3.353)



### Article info

Article Received: 22/07/2025

Article Accepted: 26/08/2025

Published online: 30/08/2025

### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to locate Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam's autobiography *Wings of Fire* in the genre of motivational non-fiction. This genre is also known as inspirational literature. Such books motivate, guide and encourage positive change, and help overcome challenges in life. They offer actional strategies while rendering practical advice. They teach perseverance, resilience, quest for knowledge and are noted for their clear and concise language, empowering tone and a sense of self-discovery. A significant portion of the book is devoted to highlighting the role of mentoring. The above mentioned characteristics are present in *Wings of Fire*.

**Keywords:** inspirational, guide, change, strategies, resilience, clear, self-discovery, mentoring.

## 1. Introduction

The genre of motivational literature has a glorious history that spans thousands of years. In his discourse, Aristotle has acknowledged the healing effect of book reading. Sun Zsu's *The Art of War* is still very popular. Rhonda Bryne's *The Secret* (2006) is one of the best sellers even today. Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* are the masterpieces that attract huge readership. The famous self improvement author Brian Tracy has produced a series of books that include *The Psychology of Selling*, *No Excuse*, *Self Made Millionaires*, *Million Dollar Habits* etc. Dr. A. P. J.

*Abdul Kalam's Wings of Fire* (1998) has many characteristics generally found in a motivational book. Some of the characteristics are discussed below:

### 2.1 Autobiographical in form

An autobiography is an authentic account of the author's own past life. Generally, it is written in first person form. The aim of such a personal account is to share the past experience, share vision and perspective through a series of events and incidents. It provides insights into the author's life and also let the readers know about the social and cultural milieu of the time. Arun Tiwari is the co-author of this autobiography. He worked

under Dr APJ Abdul Kalam in the Defence Research and Development Laboratory (DRDL).

'I was born into a middle-class Tamil family in the island town of Rameswaram in the erstwhile Madras state. My father, Jainulabdeen, had neither much formal education nor much wealth.' (Kalam 1998)

## 2.2 Action inspiring

The motivational books inspire people to take action. They provide the readers with strategies of goal setting. They help readers stay motivated and work consistently in order to accomplish the set target. In this process the habit formation plays a crucial role. This genre gives tips to give up lethargic habits and acquire new positive habits. When we look at the *The Wings of Fire*, the first takeaway is invariably the action inspiring character of the book. The author lived a disciplined lifestyle. While leading the key technological missions like making India self-reliant in space technology and rocketry, he worked consistently for decades. The book advises the readers break down the task into small tasks and then complete each one efficiently so that we can carry out the big tasks easily. Dr. APJ underscores the fact that the best time is 'now'. We may have the best plans in future but the ordinary plan that we have now is the best plan.

'A quotation from General George Patton was given as a counterpoint to this myth—that a good plan violently executed right now is far better than a perfect plan executed next week.' (Kalam 1998)

## 2.3 Empowering Tone

A motivational book carries a strong empowering tone. The present autobiography contains the poems of Lewis Carroll, S. T. Coleridge, quotes of G. B. Shaw, Khalil Gibran, Bhagvat Geeta, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata etc. There are references to the Holy Quran too.

The purpose of employing such an uplifting tone is to inspire the readers.

'All these rockets and missiles are His work through a small person called Kalam, in order to tell the several million masses of India, to never feel small or helpless.' (Kalam 1998)

Dr. APJ loved music. He played Vina. When Padma Bhushan Award was announced to him in 1981, his happiness knew no bounds. Hearing the news he listened to the Shahnai of great Indian musician Ustad Bismillah Khan. The sublime effect of the music transported him to another world. According to him the earth is the most powerful planet. He cites the poem of John Milton to justify the uniqueness of the planet. When he joined DRDL in 1982, the laboratory was still haunted by the winding up of the devil project. To explain the atmosphere prevailing there, Dr. APJ cited the poem of S. T. Coleridge entitled *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

'Wings of Fire is also a story of empowerment. Dr Kalam's narrative is not merely about his own rise but about how ordinary people when empowered through education and opportunities, can contribute to extraordinary national achievements.' (Mohammad 2024)

## 2.4 Perseverance and Resilience

Meriam Webster Dictionary defines perseverance as 'the quality of continuing with something even though it is difficult' ("Perseverance" n.d.) Most self-help books teach perseverance. Perseverance is the cornerstone of *Wings of Fire*. The author highlights the importance of completing task notwithstanding the obstacles and barriers in the path.

'I have always considered the price of perfection prohibitive and allowed mistakes as a part of my team members by paying vigilant attention to each of their attempts, be they successful or unsuccessful.' (Kalam 1998)

Cambridge Dictionary defines resilience as 'the ability to withstand or adjust to challenges'. He was born in a small town. He had to face problems while pursuing higher education. He studied in Schwartz High School, St. Joseph College, Trichi, MIT Madras etc. For his education his sister Johra had to sell her ornaments. He remained undeterred by the financial constraints. Though raised in a highly multicultural environment, on occasions experienced religious discrimination. In August 1979 the SLV-3 experimental trial met with a failure. The second stage got out of control. It splashed into the sea. However, he did not stop trying. He found the cause of the failure, rectified it and successfully launched SLV-3 in 1980.

### 2.5 Self Improvement

His cousin, Samsuddin was the sole distributor for newspapers in Rameswaram. This association kept him abreast of current developments in the National Independence Movement. There were news about Hitler, Mahatma Gandhi and Jinnah etc. Dinamani was the most sought after newspaper. He glanced at the pictures in the newspaper. He got a few books to read in those days. They were scarce commodity. He read books in the personal library of STR Manickam who was a former 'revolutionary' nationalist. He encouraged him to read and even borrow books. While at Ramnathpuram, he constantly remembered his father's message and his mission in life.

'Despite my homesickness, I was determined to come to terms with the new environment because I knew my father had invested great hopes in my success. My father visualized me as a Collector in the making and I thought it my duty to realise my father's dream.'  
(Kalam 1998)

After the success of SLV-3, there was a complete rethinking about his own self and behaviour. There was a sort of disconnect between his past and present. Similarly the coordination

between the present and the future was the uppermost in his mind. He highlights the need for renewal. It was time to clean the slate and write new sums. He started reevaluating his own progress. He began to set his own questions and seek the answers

'My world, by now, had no simplicity left in it. It had become internally complex and externally difficult...I was aware that it required a special effort of the will to sustain my trajectory.'  
(Kalam 1998)

### 2.6 Precise and Concise language

Precision is the most striking feature of this book. The author has used clear and specific words to narrate the story of his life. The words used are accurate and not vague. The writer has built word picture by using vivid imagery. Similarly we come to know a lot of technical terms which are explained in the simplest possible language in order to make it comprehensible to even a layman.

'Aeronautics is a fascinating subject, containing within it the promise of freedom. The great difference between freedom and escape, between motion and movement, between slide and flow are the secrets of this science.'  
(Kalam 1998)

The autobiography has remarkable conciseness which is achieved by means of frequent use of active voice. An appropriate word goes in an appropriate place. The author has eliminated redundancy to utmost care. While reading the book we come to know that the authors have deliberately avoided cliches. The sentences are kept short. Also the paragraphs are short. There is focus on the key points throughout the discourse.

'I learned how to check a crankshaft for wear and tear, and a connecting rod and crankshaft for twist. I did calibrations of a fixedpitch fan fitted to a supercharged engine. I opened up pressure

and acceleration-cum-speed control systems, and air starter supply systems of turboengines.' (Kalam 1998)

## 2.7 Focus on self-discovery and quest for knowledge

Throughout the book, Dr. Kalam highlights the importance of knowledge. He emphasises that we have to focus on education and acquire necessary skills. Knowledge is an asset. We have to stay updated with the latest advancements in the area we are working in.

'First, by building your own education and skills. Knowledge is a tangible asset, quite often the most important tool in your work. The more up-to-date the knowledge you possess, the freer you are.' (Kalam 1998)

At MIT Madras, when there were setbacks and distractions he remembered the father's advice: He who knows others is learned, but the wise one is the one who knows himself. Learning without wisdom is of no use. As a trainee at HAL he got a lot of practical exposure which was missing in the college classroom. It is exciting to apply the principles learnt in the classroom in the real life situations. He also lauds the intuitive feel of the work of HAL technicians. They were not the students of great universities. They had many years' of hand's on experience. It has given them a kind of intuitive feel for the task.

## 2.8 Helps in overcoming challenges

The book relates a journey of a child born in a small town named Rameshwaram. His father was a boat owner. He had his primary education in a school in Rameshwaram. Later he was admitted to Schwartz High School at Ramnathpuram. Then he joined St. Joseph's College Trichi. He was admitted Madras Institute of technology in 1955. He also worked with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) and produced satellite launch vehicles and missiles like Agni, Prithwi,

Akash, Nag, Trishul. He achieved these milestones in an adverse situation. He worked hard and focused on his mission. His personal life was full of difficulties. As a technocrat, he fought with the resistive forces. The story gives readers the message that one should not surrender to the difficulties but take the problems head on. These lessons motivate readers to face the adversities in life with confidence.

'My impression of the American people can be summarized by a quotation from Benjamin Franklin, "Those things that hurt instruct!" I realised that people in this part of the world meet their problems head on. They attempt to get out of them rather than suffer them.' (Kalam 1998)

## 2.9 Mentorship

A motivational book underscores the importance of having a mentor in life. The role of the mentor is to counsel the mentee. The mentor is a wise person who provides advice to the mentee. The Oxford Learner Dictionary defines mentorship as 'the practice of helping and advising a less experienced person over a period of time, especially as part of a formal programme in a company, university, etc.' (Mentorship n. d.)

At Rameswaram his relative Ahmed Jallaluddin talked mainly of spiritual matters. He had limited school but possessed wisdom. He introduced young Abdul with the brave new world that lay beyond our narrow confines. His cousin, Samsuddin was the sole distributor for newspapers in Rameswaram. Young Abdul sometimes helped him manage the task of paper distribution. Thus he could glance at the pictures in the newspaper. His teacher Sivasubramania Iyer reminded him of the larger mission: to cherish a larger dream of serving the motherland. At Schwartz High School of Ramanathapuram he got mentoring from an ideal teacher named Eudurai Solomon.

He made him aware of possibilities and alternatives in future.

At St. Joseph's College Trichi, he met Rev. Father TN Sequeira who taught English. His energy and patience was amazing. He was a very considerate person. He liked the way Prof. Chinna Durai taught subatomic physics. Prof. Krishnamurthy introduced the concept of the half-life period and that of radioactive decay of substances. At MIT, three teachers shaped my thinking. They were Prof. Sponder, Prof. KAV Pandalai and Prof. Narasingha Rao and Prof. Sponder. Prof. Srinivasan, then the Director of the MIT first took him to task for the delay in the project. He tested his hard work and ability to follow time limits.

Prof. Sarabhai identified the hidden potential in Dr. Kalam while he interviewed him for Indian Committee for Space Research. Prof. Sarabhai was keen to know about how the candidate could work for the bigger dream of space research. He charged the young technicians with dynamism. He had faith in their capabilities. Prof. Sarabhai was a great experimenter and innovator. He was a great exemplar of leadership by trust. Brahm Prakash was a renowned metallurgist. After the failure of SLV-3 in August 1979, he felt very nervous and lost his confidence. Dr. Brahm Prakash counselled him and helped him come out of the sorrow. Dr Brahm Prakash stood by Dr. Kalam in his difficult period. Dr. Kalam acknowledged that whenever he deviated from the mission objective the wise counsellor Dr. Brahm Prakash gave him a valuable guidance.

## 2.10 Spirituality

Right from the first chapter, the spirational orientation is prominently visible. He was brought up in a highly multicultural and secular environment of Rameshwaram. This shaped his broader and tolerant outlook to life and continued to guide him in his personal and professional life in later years. He believes that God has created every creature to fulfil a specific purpose. He admits that he could create missiles

only because of the God's will. According to him, God has blessed him with outstanding teachers and colleagues. He never feels small or helpless while sharing this unflinching belief in God. According to him, we are born with a divine fire in us and it is our duty to give wings to this fire and fill the world with the glow of its goodness.

The priest of Rameswaram temple, Pakshi Lakshmana Sastry, was a very close friend of his father. They always discussed spiritual matters. The Priest did not like when somebody tried to instill communal hatred into the minds of children. The author keenly listened to them. His father, Jainulabdeen, was not a highly educated person. He was not a rich man. But he possessed great innate wisdom and generosity of spirit. He admired the way Jalaluddin talked about spiritual matters. It seemed as if he had a working partnership with God. Dr. APJ believed in the power of prayer. He found that science and spirituality are complementary. Science does not take man away from God. The path of science always wind through the heart. He says that science has always been the path to spiritual enrichment and self realization.

The IGDMP projecct (1983) which was launched under the leadership of Dr. Kalam carried the names of Gods and Goddess. The Surface-to-Surface weapon system was named as Prithvi. The Tactical Core Vehicle was christened as Trishul meaning the trident of Lord Shiva. The Surface to-Air area defence system was christened as Akash ("sky"). The anti-tank missile project carried the name Nag ("Cobra"). He gave the name Agni ("Fire") to his long cherished dream of REX.

## 2.11 Conclusion

*The Wings of Fire* is written in autobiographical form. It relates the story of a ordinary person who led India's mission of developing satellite launch vehicles and missiles making India self-reliant in matters of defence technology. The book contains many

characteristics of motivational non-fiction genre. The narrative has a strong empowering tone. The anecdotes teach perseverance and resilience which renders it a motivational character to the book. A significant portion of the narrative is devoted to highlighting the importance of self-improvement. From the craftsmanship point of view, the precise and concise language is pretty appealing. It talks of focus on self-discovery and quest for knowledge. The book is loaded with practical tips and strategies that help readers overcome challenges. Mentorship is also one of the salient feature of this autobiography. These characteristics make the book a classic in the genre of inspirational literature.

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