

Studying Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, the Missile Man and People's President of India in His Poetic Orbit

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Abstract: Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam is chiefly known as a renowned nuclear scientist. Like many other scientists his creative soul was also trapped in the literary web. He ventured the literary world successfully with so many inspiring and thought provoking writings on multiple subject matters mainly targeting the youth and children of the nation. He could not spare himself from trying his hand at depicting his feelings and emotions in the earliest literary genre, poetry. The tributaries of contemporary and at the same time socio-politically relevant issues join the larger flow of his poetic venture. In him lurks a great poet if not a poet par excellence. The present paper is a select study of Kalama's five great poetry on diverse themes.

Keywords: Abdul Kalam, Divinity, Indian festivals, poetry, humanity.

Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen Abdul Kalam (15 October 1931 – 27 July 2015) is better known as a scientist all over the world. He was a student of physics and aerospace engineering and dreamt to be a part of the Indian Air Force as a pilot of fighter jet. Unfortunately he did not get the chance to fly in the sky of his wish. He had to compromise with his childhood dream. He became a scientist and started working with Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). He contributed a lot to India's civilian space program and military missile development. Thus he came to be called Missile Man of India. He played a pivotal role in Pokhran-II nuclear tests in 1998. In political dimension he held the capital constitutional post of India. He was elected the 11th President of India and served the office from 2002 to 2007 amid immense popularity. During his lifetime he was adorned with many national and international awards including the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honour in 1997. Apart from his world of science and technology, he was a great teacher and a great writer. He wrote many thought provoking and inspirational books such as *Wings of Fire*, *Ignited Minds*, *India 2020*, and *Target 3 Billion*. Besides these prose writings he wrote some of the finest

poetry at leisure. The poems from the pen of People's President are really of a high standard and deserve attention. They are rich in variety of themes and techniques. Through a selective reading of his poetry the present paper tries to picture the poetic self of this great personality.

The paper will deal with five of his poetry- *Our Mission is Water*, *Prayer for Departed Children of Kumbakonam*, *My Dear Soldiers*, *Rakhi Day is Righteous Day*, and *Where Are We?* All the poems are taken from his personal website.³ They have been chosen keeping in mind their varied themes which reflect the checkered moods and thought processes of Dr. Kalam, the poet.

In the poem *Our Mission is Water* Dr. Kalam has delineated a picture of united humanity through the symbolic presentation of the river Nile. The Nile is a confluence of two tributaries-the Blue Nile and the White Nile. The poet says the two rivers undergo a long and difficult journey to reach Sudanese capital Khartoum where they meet. This very confluence serves a great "mission" (12) for the betterment of human civilisation. The "beautiful message" (14) of the confluence should reach the humanity.

The present world is segmented each day on the pretexts of caste, creed, religion, politics, economy, language, culture and many more. We have failed to make the world a common ground for the greater cause of a united humanity. Nature has no such intention to divide the humanity. Human civilisation has grown on the lap of nature since its creation and nature has always been a mother figure for all the creatures. Mother never divides her children on any pretext. To her eyes all are equal and get equal treatment of love and affection from her. If our creator, i.e. mother nature does not divide us, how can we divide humanity is the question raised by the poet in this poem.

Dr. Kalam sketches the journey of the Nile and uses it as his mouthpiece. The Nile is a major river in northwestern Africa and is considered to be the longest river in the world. It is international in its character as its water resources are shared by eleven countries, though the poet says "enriching nine countries" (10). Apart from the geographical status of the river the poem demands a deep analysis. The title itself is very relevant and speaks many a word. Water is life and it is a universal truth. If the word 'water' is superseded by the word 'life' the title reads 'Our Mission is Life'. Dr. Kalam always voted in favour of a universal life nullifying the least possibility of any sort of discrimination. Life should flow like water crossing all the barriers and enriching the greater humanity. Our hearts should "travel" (8) "thousands of miles" (10) to come together demolishing all kinds of divisions. The purpose of humanity will not be fulfilled until they feel the touch of common water-

the universal life. Dr. Kalam proves to be a great poet when we see his love for nature and his ability to interpret nature in an allegorical sense. The symbolic use of the river Nile is very fitting to the very theme of the poem to delineate a broader perspective of humanity. The colours 'blue' and 'white' in the poem symbolically suggest the different colours of human being living in different parts of the world. Surely the humanity will "blossom with happiness" (17) only when we will be able to dissolve our hearts in the water of a larger civilisation composed of many ages, many races, and many places. It is obvious from the tone and ambience of the poem that mother nature is addressed here repeatedly by the poet as 'mother'. The "mountains, forests and valleys" (9) here indicate the rough terrains and variety of journeys the human civilisation crosses each day to mould the world into a beautifully livable place for every one of us. *Our Mission is Water* compels us to think about universal citizenship about which Rabindranath Tagore already promulgated in his writings.

Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam's love for children is widely known. He considers them the future of a nation because today's child will grow and in due process will become responsible citizen of the nation. He said, "Let us sacrifice our today so that our children can have a better tomorrow."² The poem *Prayer for Departed Children of Kumbakonam* is written in the backdrop of the great school fire accident in Tamil Nadu on 16 July 2004. The fire swallowed 94 students of the primary section of the Krishna English Medium School. "The accident was one of the four major fire accidents and largest school accident in Tamil Nadu, and second in terms of casualties for fire incidents in schools in India"¹⁰

Parents cherish their "glorious dreams" (2) for their "little ones" (1) who too are lost in their own dreams to do something in their life so that they can make their parents smile. But when something unfortunate happens to the children, parents are left only with the traumatic memories which torture them all the time. It is also expected that old parents will be buried by their sons but when the reverse happens, it brings a gruesome moment for the seniors. Dr. Kalam was deeply moved by the enormous loss of innocent lives. The darling buds were untimely ripped from the womb of their parents. The flame of the cursed fire burnt the future of the nation. The poet sounds injured and prays,

*Oh Almighty! show Your grace on those little ones
And keep them all in Thy Holiest Presence!! (9-10)*

The poet never married but he had the capacity to be empathetic to the parents who lost their innocent children in the horrific accident. The fire not only perished those pure pearls but also scorched the hearts of their parents. Dr. Kalam is also concerned about the burning pyres of their hearts-

*Oh Almighty! bless those parents wilting in grief
To have the strength to bear this great loss (11-12)*

The poet has full faith in the divine power to soothe the sore hearts of those unfortunate parents. He also hopes that God will shower His grace on the departed souls. The poem well mirrors the innermost feelings of the poet for children. The ashes of the fire of Kumbakonam smeared the face of those who were responsible to the safety of the school children. The poem implicitly raises many important questions about the infrastructure of the schools as far as the implementation of midday meal scheme is concerned. The careless attitude of the authority is severely criticised by Dr. Kalam though he is not vocal. His love and concern about the future of the nation is well understood in the poem which is dedicated to the victims of Kumbakonam.

In his young age Dr. Kalam wanted to be a pilot in Indian Air Force but the wheel of fortune made him a scientist. Throughout his life he was actively involved in the defence sector of the nation and was concerned about national security. All these factors perhaps made him have a deep regard for those young men who are devoted to defend our nation perhaps because he observed their life very closely. In the poem *My Dear Soldiers* the poet salutes those great sons of mother India who keep the borders of the nation intact at any cost. The poem presents a painstaking picture of a soldier's life. When the nation sleeps in peace the soldiers spend sleepless nights under the open sky bearing each and every onslaught of nature. They are least moved by the "Windy season or snowy days/ Or scorching sun's sweltering rays" (5-6). The brave hearts of our land are always ready to respond to the clarion call of the nation whenever and wherever they are wanted. Border patrolling is not an easy job but no obstacle from ocean to sky, desert to marshes, hills to valleys can diminish their dauntless spirit. They are dedicated to the cause of the nation and they are proud to offer the prime of their youth to national security. They are happy to be a part of the service to their motherhood.

The poem has a universal appeal. The poem can also be interpreted as a great tribute to the gallantry of soldiers irrespective of any nation. The duty of a soldier has never been easy in any age and in any nation. They are born to die for their motherland. In present day context all nations are on the wire of increasing tension. National security is the utmost important issue for a nation and the job of a soldier is going to play a vital role in this respect. Dr. Kalam always had a great respect for the brave souls. In the closing line he prays, "May the Lord bless you all!!" (15). His respect and love for the soldiers was seen when he was going to IIM Shillong. Unfortunately that was his last journey as he died there while delivering his lecture. Srijan Pal Sing, his companion of many journeys writes on his Facebook page,

“We were in a convoy of 6-7 cars. Dr. Kalam and I were in the second car. Ahead us was an open gypsy with three soldiers in it. Two of them were sitting on either side and one lean guy was standing atop, holding his gun. [...] Dr. Kalam said, “Why is he standing? He will get tired. This is like punishment. Can you ask a wireless message to given that he may sit?” I had to convince him, he has been probably instructed to keep standing for better security. He did not relent. We tried radio messaging, that did not work. For the next 1.5 hours of the journey, he reminded me thrice to see if I can hand signal him to sit down. Finally, realizing there is little we can do – he told me, “I want to meet him and thank him”. Later, when we landed in IIM Shillong, I went inquiring through security people and got hold of the standing guy. I took him inside and Dr. Kalam greeted him. He shook his hand, said thank you buddy. “Are you tired? Would you like something to eat? I am sorry you had to stand so long because of me”. The young lean guard, draped in black cloth, was surprised at the treatment.”⁸

Dr. Kalam had not confined himself within the orbit of science and technology. Being a versatile person he was conscious oh his country's rich culture and tradition. Though he was born in a Muslim family, since his childhood he was open minded enough to soak up the juice of other religions without any inhibition. Raksha Bandhan is mainly a Hindu festival but Shikhs and Jains also observe it. On the fool moon day of the Shravan month of the Hindu lunisolar calendar, the festival is celebrated widely in different parts of India with enough mirth and excitement. It is a celebration of brother-sister relationship. On this auspicious day sister tie a *rakhi* (sacred thread) on the wrist of her brother. This means the sister's love and prayer for her brother's well being and the brothers' lifelong pledge to protect and take care of her sister.

In the poem *Rakhi Day Is Righteous Day*, Dr. Kalam tells his readers about the rituals and significance of this ancient Indian Hindu festival. He says on Rakhi Day we feel a strong faith in our hearts and serenity fills our mind. When the lamp is lit, the whole house glows with the radiance of peace, prosperity, joy, and happiness which spread crossing the threshold of the house to the outer world. The poem sounds emphatic when he says, “Righteous homes alone make a beautiful State” (8). Here Dr. Kalam refers to the old dictum- charity begins at home. A nation is nothing but a bevy of many homes. If every person of each home takes an oath to be righteous, nation will automatically be beautiful. Sisters will tie the *rakhi* on their brothers' wrist and thus the latter will always “do only what is right and clean” (10). This very thought of the poet adds

another significance to the pious festival. Sisters' putting *kumkum* and blessed rice on the head of their brothers are also indicative. He hopes that on the head of the brothers "will dwell right thoughts and noble action" (12). The poem is not just about the celebration of Rakhi. The poet has tried to see the festival of Rakhi through the glass of nation's necessity of the hour. He accentuates on the need of a better society and a better India. In Indian context religious festivals can play a very significant role in nation building and this very treatment of such a festival in the hand of Dr. Kalam is definitely a unique concept.

India is the largest democracy in the world and her Parliament is the centre around which the whole of the democratic system gyrates. Dr. Kalam had a great respect for the democratic system of his country. He was the 11th President of India and that gave him the opportunity to observe the democratic system of the country very closely. His own participation in the system enriched him. The poem *Where Are We?* is the product of his own perception about the parliamentarians of the country.

We elect our representatives and send them to Parliament to voice our demands, problems, and needs. The poet rightly calls Parliament a "Maha Sabha" (2) because the parliamentarians come from different parts of India with their own socio-cultural and lingual backgrounds. In the arena of democracy they engage themselves in various debates and discussions so that the chariot of national progress always moves. Parliament echoes with the heartbeats of every Indian through his/her own representative. The poet considers the parliamentarians as "the sculptors of Mother India" (5) because they make and amend laws for their fellow citizens which we abide by. Dr. Kalam's competency as a poet is strengthened with the use of such a relevant and logical analogy. He urges the parliamentarians to "Lead us unto light, enrich our lives" (6). He has faith in the power of the people who run the Parliament. He also knows it very well that the amelioration of common Indians depends on the honest efforts of the parliamentarians. If they fulfil their duty as they are expected to do, people will "Nurture great thoughts, rise up in actions" (10). Dr. Kalam was conscious of the social evils such as violence, corruption, and communal bias prevalent in the Indian democratic system. With this thought he warns the parliamentarians, "May righteous methods be your guide" (11). It is a matter of real concern for Indian democracy if it fails to wipe out the aforesaid social ills. In the last line of the poem he prays to the Almighty for everyone's betterment. The title of the poem-*Where Are We?*-shoots a question to the parliamentarians as if to make them realise the importance of the very place where they are, the Parliament.

Democracy in India has always been active but there are so many loopholes in the system. Even after 68 years of Independence it has failed to satisfy the aspiration of common Indians in many respects. The

political system of the country is to be restructured for the betterment of masses. The growing dissatisfaction among the citizens of the country regarding the motives of the politicians must be addressed if the parliamentary democracy of the country is to be upheld. Dr. Kalam's poem *Where Are We?* implicitly drives this message home. All the poems selected here in the paper are unique in their own way from multiple angles. They reveal the poet at his best. Dr. Kalam wrote on the relevant issues of the society as well as the nation. In these poems he has shown his love for nature, humanity, children, soldiers, Indian culture, and democracy. His uses simple and lucid language so that it can be easily read and understood by maximum number of readers especially the children and youths.

Literature is not a domain of a particular kind of person. Any person from any walk of life can dwell in the palace of literature. Since the start of civilisation human being has a penchant for writing poetry and fortunately Dr. Kalam is no exception. The workaholic man unlocked his heart and head to pour out his thoughts, feelings, and experiences to his fellow citizens. The great penmanship of the People's President has established him as a popular writer of the present time.

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