

## Book Review

Title	: <i>Limitless</i>
Author	: Rachel Thomas
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Price	: Rs. 450

*Limitless* unfolds as a poignant autobiography documenting the extraordinary journey of Rachel Thomas, India's pioneering female skydiver. The narrative, set against the backdrop of societal norms and gender expectations prevalent in the 1970s, delves into Thomas' experiences as she defies conventions and societal expectations to embrace the challenging world of skydiving. A resident of Bengal who later relocated to Agra due to marriage, Thomas entered the realm of skydiving in 1979, a time when the sport of skydiving was predominantly reserved for army officers in the aviation sector. Notably, Thomas embarks on her foray into skydiving during her early twenties while concurrently navigating the responsibilities of motherhood. The narrative poignantly captures the mother's guilt she grapples with each time she embarks on her skydiving pursuits, juggling the demands of motherhood with an unwavering commitment to her aspirations, emphasizing the societal taboo attached to women pursuing unconventional professions during the period when societal norms for women were laden with restrictions, especially in unconventional professions reinforcing expectations of obedience and submissiveness. The narrative underscores her significant achievements, culminating in her historic jump over the North Pole in 2002, earning her the prestigious Padma Shree in 2005. In its essence, the autobiography offers profound insights into the landscape of India's aviation and skydiving programs, encapsulating a compelling narrative steeped in resilience, determination, and unyielding grit.

Spanning thirteen chapters, the book thoroughly navigates through the author's life journey, offering a comprehensive exploration from childhood to the present. In a remarkable turn of fate, Thomas, as the wife of a paratrooper, discovered the initiation of a new institute dedicated

to training skydiving. Displaying no hesitation, she promptly enrolled as part of the inaugural batch of trainees, alongside two other army officers' wives. Joining as part of the inaugural batch, she perseveres where others falter, illustrating her tenacity as a mother of two defying societal expectations. Despite her groundbreaking achievements, she remains uncredited for her courageous pursuit against the odds. Her initiation into skydiving challenges the stereotypical roles assigned to women and defies the restrictive notions surrounding certain professions. This facet of the narrative not only underscores Thomas's personal determination but also serves as a microcosm of the broader societal shifts occurring during that transformative era. The narrative becomes a testament to her pioneering role, breaking barriers not only as a woman in a male-dominated sport but also as an avant-garde during a period of societal flux.

The broader significance of the book lies in its contribution to the understanding of gender roles and societal expectations prevalent in 1970s India. Her story becomes emblematic of challenging gender biases in sports, particularly in male-dominated fields like skydiving. As a scientific sport, skydiving demands intelligence and the presence of mind. Substantially, *Limitless* emerges as not merely a life narrative but a valuable historical document, shedding light on the evolution of gender dynamics and societal perceptions in India during a transformative period. The period further bore witness to the taboo surrounding skydiving as a civilian sport in India, reserved primarily for army officers within the aviation section due to the risk factor. The narrative underscores the Air Force's initial inclination to reserve skydiving for the elite, and Thomas' intrusion into this male bastion emerges as a transformative act. Undeterred by these societal constraints, Thomas grappled with the unique challenges of pursuing her passion. In the historical context, Thomas' participation in the early days of civilian skydiving in India adds a layer of significance to her story. As one of the first civilian participants, she contributes to the evolution of perceptions around skydiving, gradually transforming it from an exclusive pursuit of the military elite to a more accessible and acceptable sport for the broader public. This paradigm shift becomes an intrinsic part of Thomas' narrative, portraying her as not only a passionate skydiver but a catalyst for change in societal attitudes toward women in unconventional pursuits.

The narrative further unravels Thomas' personal connection to the sky, a sentiment rooted in her childhood, tracing back to her childhood tomboyishness and her aversion to traditional gender norms. The narrative acutely captures the intricacies of her training, a journey where steadfastness

perseveres in the face of attrition, with Thomas standing resolute even as her contemporaries abandon the pursuit. Delving into the minutiae of each parachute jump, the narrative encapsulates the psychological landscape preceding each leap, the palpable nervousness, the emancipation discovered in the boundless expanse of the sky, and the meticulous technical analyses that accompany each descent. A critical examination of her experiences with each parachute jump reveals the psychological intricacies, from a pre-jump mindset to palpable nervousness, offering profound insights into the psychological dimensions of her journey. Through an academic lens, the autobiography emerges as a valuable document offering insights into the evolution of India's aviation and skydiving programs, while concurrently serving as a compelling exploration of the psychological and technical dimensions inherent in the pursuit of skydiving excellence.

Thomas' journey is not without personal challenges, including a divorce during the 1980s, a period when societal prejudices against divorced women were pronounced. Her unwavering commitment to skydiving becomes her refuge, providing identity and respect surpassing societal judgments. The autobiography reveals the societal hurdles she faced, the camaraderie and opposition within the male-dominated sport, and the evolving landscape of skydiving for women in India. Thomas' experiences abroad, where skydiving is more advanced, contrast with her struggles in the male bastion of Indian skydiving. The narrative touches upon financial constraints, irregular training, and a lack of standard equipment faced by skydivers in India, highlighting the disparities in the nation's skydiving landscape. The book portrays Thomas as a woman of faith and a trailblazer in various spheres. Transitioning from an active skydiver to an International Judge, Thomas faces further challenges and triumphs. From her early jumps to becoming India's first International Judge for Accuracy, Thomas' journey showcases her indomitable spirit.

The autobiographical genre is often characterized by a nuanced interplay between the subjectivity of the author and the selective presentation of events, allowing for a curated narrative that aligns with the author's chosen interpretation and perspective. However, in the case of *Limitless*, a departure from this conventional approach is evident. Thomas' narrative exhibits a notable degree of candour, eschewing the typical inclination toward selective storytelling. Rather than opting for a polished rendition that highlights only successes or significant milestones, Thomas takes a notably honest and comprehensive approach. Her narrative transcends conventional autobiographical practices by candidly recounting both fail-

ures and successes, providing a detailed and unfiltered account of her life experiences. This departure from the normative tropes of autobiographical writing contributes to a narrative richness that offers readers a genuine and unvarnished portrayal of the author's journey.

In addition to the unconventional transparency characterizing Rachel Thomas' autobiographical narrative, the pervasive usage of Christian metaphors and Biblical imagery serves as a distinctive feature indicative of the author's profound devoutness. Thomas' narrative transcends the conventional boundaries of autobiographical expression by interweaving religious symbolism throughout her account. The deliberate infusion of Christian metaphors and Biblical references underscores the spiritual dimension of her journey, adding a layer of profound meaning to the narrative. The metaphorical use of "prayer as a bridge between Panic and Peace" exemplifies her adept use of figurative language to convey the emotional and psychological aspects of her skydiving journey. This unique blend of transparency in storytelling and the incorporation of religious symbolism not only amplifies the authenticity of the autobiography but also positions it within a broader spiritual and introspective framework. The intertwining of personal honesty and religious symbolism contributes to the narrative's complexity, inviting readers to engage with the author's experiences on both a personal and spiritual level.

The author employs a rich tapestry of words associated with skydiving, such as "limitless," "resilience," "determination," and "grit." These words carry connotations of boundless possibilities, unwavering resolve, and unyielding courage. The author provides vivid descriptions of her skydiving experiences, offering readers a sensory journey. Descriptions of the "freedom she finds in the sky's vastness" and the technical aspects of each jump create a palpable mental image, immersing the reader in the exhilarating and sometimes challenging world of skydiving. The recurring motif of skydiving as a metaphor for breaking societal norms and gender biases adds depth to the narrative. The sky becomes a symbol of freedom and empowerment, challenging traditional expectations associated with gender roles. Thomas' use of the term mother's guilt highlights the emotional conflict she faces between pursuing her passion for skydiving and her responsibilities as a mother. This nuanced representation adds depth to her character, portraying her as someone grappling with personal responsibilities while pursuing her dreams. This phrase becomes a powerful linguistic tool to convey the nuanced emotional landscape of her journey. Additionally, the juxtaposition of 'obedient and submissive' with her daring pursuit of skydiving serves as a linguistic play to underscore

societal expectations and her defiance of these norms. On a whole, the author skillfully employs wordplay and imagery, weaving a narrative that extends beyond the literal account of her skydiving experiences to encompass deeper themes of spirituality, empowerment, and societal defiance.

The writer represents herself as a spearhead who defies societal norms and gender expectations. The choice to pursue skydiving in a period when it was not considered a sport for civilians, especially women, positions her as a courageous individual who is challenging traditional constraints. Navigating the challenges posed by her dual identity as a civilian and a woman, Rachel accomplished a remarkable total of 650 jumps throughout her career in skydiving. By describing herself as a tomboy in her childhood and later embracing skydiving, traditionally considered a "men's sport," the writer constructs an identity that transcends conventional gender roles. This self-representation challenges stereotypes and showcases her resilience in carving a unique path. Concisely, Rachel Thomas employs a language that is both descriptive and metaphorical, enhancing the narrative with sensory details and deeper meanings. Her self-representation is characterized by courage, self-awareness, and a determination to break societal norms, making her a compelling protagonist in her own story.

*Limitless* not only chronicles the personal odyssey of Rachel Thomas but also symbolizes a broader narrative of women breaking barriers, challenging societal norms, and redefining their identities in the pursuit of passion. Despite her groundbreaking contributions, the narrative points out that skydiving in India remains in its nascent stage due to a stringent system. Thomas' story, while celebrating her individual triumphs, raises broader questions about the challenges and opportunities for women in extreme sports in India. In conclusion, *Limitless* offers a nuanced and inspirational account of Rachel Thomas' journey, providing a lens into the evolving landscape of skydiving in India, the societal dynamics of the time, and the transformative power of passion and perseverance. The book resonates as an inspiring testament to resilience, determination, and the indomitable spirit of women in unconventional pursuits, making it a valuable addition to the literature on gender, sports, and societal transformation.

**Abish Jebeshy R.**