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Threads of Knowledge: A Journey Through Literacy and Heritage

When I was six years old, I sat cross-legged on the living room floor, my small hands clutching a book that felt impossibly large. My father, sitting beside me, patiently guided me through the sentences, encouraging me to sound out words I couldn't yet pronounce. At that age, I didn't understand the weight of his lessons; I simply knew that stories could transport me to places I'd never seen, and words could give me wings to explore them. But the literacy he was teaching me was more than reading. It was a window into a life shaped by knowledge, perseverance, and the choices he and my mother had made.

My father often reminds me, "You can steal money, but you cannot steal knowledge." This phrase has become a guiding principle in my life, a constant reminder of the value my parents place on education. Born and raised in India, they witnessed firsthand a culture where women were often expected to marry young and prioritize family obligations over schooling. My grandmother and cousins, despite their intelligence, were unable to finish their education. Yet my parents pursued their studies relentlessly, determined not to be confined by these societal expectations. By teaching me to read and write, my father was instilling more than literacy. He was embedding in me a respect for the opportunities that had been denied to many in his family.

Reading became a shared routine in my household. My mother would tell me stories from Indian mythology, her voice flowing like a melody, connecting me to a heritage that was both foreign and familiar. Each tale carried lessons about courage, justice, and resilience, and I

learned that words were not just symbols on a page. They were vessels for culture, identity, and morality. These moments were formative because they taught me literacy as a lived experience. I was not only decoding language, but I was decoding values, history, and a way of understanding the world.

One of the most pivotal moments in my literacy development came when I read *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini. The story of Mariam and Laila opened my eyes to the complexities of human experience and limitations society can impose on individuals. I realized how literacy could bridge empathy and understanding. Through the characters' struggles, I began to see parallels with my own family's story – how my parents had challenged expectations and created a life where knowledge and ambition were valued over conformity. The book illuminated the idea that literacy is not just functional; it is a tool for reflection, connection, and empowerment.

My literacy journey has also been influenced by the environment in which I was raised. Living in a country that prioritized education for all children, regardless of gender, offered me resources and opportunities my relatives in India never had. I attended a school with extensive libraries, technology, and teachers who encourage curiosity. Yet, the contrast between my upbringing and the lives of my family in India has made me very aware that literacy is a privilege and a responsibility. I have come to understand that being fluent with language extends beyond reading and writing. It is about questioning, interpreting, and using knowledge to make meaningful contributions to society.

Family has been the foundation of my literacy development. My parents' insistence on education was not merely about academic achievement but about shaping character. They modeled persistence, critical thinking, and ethical engagement with the world. At the same time,

my extended family in India has indirectly contributed to my literacy by serving as a contrast, showing me the consequences of limited access to education and the societal pressures that can stifle potential. Institutions like my schools reinforced these lessons, providing structured environments where literacy was celebrated and challenged. Teachers encouraged me to write creatively, read critically, and express myself confidently. I trusted them because their guidance aligned with the values I had already absorbed at home, and they had my best interests at heart by fostering both intellectual and personal growth.

These experiences have shaped my understanding of literacy as a multi-dimensional practice. It is not simply the ability to read or write; it is a way of engaging with the world, interpreting culture, and negotiating identity. Literacy is complex because it is entwined with context, values, and relationships. The stories I have read, the lessons I have absorbed from my parents, and the institutions that have guided me all intersect to form a tapestry of understanding that continues to evolve.

I recall a moment in middle school when I wrote a personal essay for an assignment. I wrote about my reflections on my family, heritage, and education on the page, trying to articulate what I had learned from my parents' sacrifices. When I received my graded paper, my teacher wrote, "Your voice is clear and compelling. You connect personal experience with universal insight." That feedback reinforced the idea that literacy is as much about expression and perspective as it about mechanics. It validated the countless hours spent reading with my father, listening to my mother's stories, and reflecting on my cultural heritage. It was a moment that crystallized my ethos as a writer. My credibility is rooted in lived experience, observation, and moral understanding.

Today as I continue to navigate academic and personal challenges, I recognize that literacy is an ongoing journey. My parents' lessons, my exposure to literature like *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and my interactions with educators have all contributed to my ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and empathize with diverse perspectives. Each formative experience has taught me that literacy is inseparable from identity, culture, and ethics. It is a tool for understanding the world, and more importantly, for contributing to it in meaningful ways.

When I think about my journey with literacy, I realize it's really a reflection of the people and places that have shaped me. My parents taught me values, discipline, and curiosity. My teachers gave me guidance and pushed me to grow. The books I've read opened my mind and taught me empathy. Even my extended family, by showing me the limits that societal expectations can place on people, has helped me appreciate the opportunities I have and the power of knowledge.

Looking back on these moments, I see that literacy is so much more than just a skill. It's both a responsibility and a gift. It connects me to my heritage, helps me make sense of the present, and gives me a way to imagine the future. It's one of the greatest legacies my parents have passed on to me, and it's the lens I'll continue to use to navigate life. Reading, writing, and storytelling aren't just school assignments – they're ways of understanding, empathizing, and finding strength. And for that, I'm deeply grateful.