

Being one of the greats at Chess comes with its pros and cons.

You bag a Guinness World Record. You get to stand on stages you once only saw through cracked television screens. Your name travels farther than your footsteps ever have, or ever *might*. You help children feel smarter by placing a board in front of them and showing them what is possible when the mind believes. You receive national and international awards. You meet all kinds of people on the planet.

And yes, if life is kind, you earn enough to buy a decent car. You sleep in a safer house, stop worrying about the price of food, maybe even retire your mum and watch her rest for the first time in decades.

The pros are amazing.

But the cons are less shiny.

They are harder to explain without sounding ungrateful. Some days, they outweigh everything else.

Being one of the greats at Chess means seeing life through an asymmetrical lens. It means you understand imbalance more than most, because you've had to survive it your whole life. Some days you feel like a King - purposeful, and other days you feel like a Pawn - small and exposed. It means learning to pick your battles wisely, because one wrong move can cost you more than the people cheering from the sidelines will ever know.

It means reconsidering your life choices every other month, wondering if you've given too much or not enough. It means being praised for strength so often you forget to consider burnout. It means fighting to stay relevant in a world that demands novelty every hour. It means carrying stories that break your heart more than they inspire you.

And you balance all of that with gratitude because the life you have now is literally an answered prayer.

In my journey, I've learned that the dots can only be connected in retrospect. It makes more sense when you look backward, not forward.

Looking back, I tend to wonder if my drive would be the same if I hadn't once lived a poor life. Would I have cared about the children in the slums if I hadn't once sat on the same dusty floors, wondering what my future would be like? Would I have built this empire of hope if I had been born to a different woman, in a different nation, with a different set of dreams?

I often think of the barber's shop where I learnt to play Chess. How that cramped shop in the slum became a doorway to everything I know now. How small acts of generosity rewired my destiny. What would have become of me if that small shop hadn't existed? If the people there did not entertain a boy fascinated by 64 squares? Where would I be if my mother had been able to afford my school fees in the first place? If poverty hadn't pushed me towards the places where I found purpose?

Life is fragile like that. It's uncanny, unassuming and quite unpredictable.

It has made me appreciate the design of my own life even more. It's made me sensitive to the beauty patterned inside the brokenness.

Yes, there are days I wish things were slightly different. There are days I wish I could disappear into a quiet life where no one knows my name. I wonder what my North Star would have been if God had chosen to place me on a calmer road.

I do not resent the path I'm on, but I sometimes question it. I say this with gratitude, awe and curiosity.

On days like these, I remind myself that every step I take leads me away from something... and toward something else. Toward something richer, deeper, and it feels like purpose.

It started with survival. That was my first identity. A boy fighting to stay afloat in a world that didn't care if he sank. A boy who learned chess because it was cheaper than

therapy and more reliable than luck. Chess became my refuge long before it became my platform.

Then survival became passion. Passion became purpose. Purpose became burden. And burden, strangely, became blessing.

I've had the best moments of my life imaginable, and I've also had to sit with my thoughts for months. I've had to strip myself of illusions, and wage quiet wars inside my own mind. I spiraled. I doubted myself. I wondered if I had become more symbol than human.

One of the hardest lessons I've learnt is that humanity is communal. Purpose is communal. Even greatness requires community. As I look at my life now, the question has changed over time. What was : **“How far can I go?”** has now become: **“Who can I lift along the way?”**

So if I'm honest, I don't know exactly where I'm going or what I'm doing next.

But I know this:

I'm becoming someone who is not driven by fear of irrelevance or fear of poverty, but by reverence for the lives intertwined with mine.

And if I do it well, perhaps others will too.