

First Flight

Ch – 2 - Nelson Mandela

Part 3

In life, every man has twin obligations — obligations to his family, to his parents, to his wife and children; and he has an obligation to his people, his community, his country. In a civil and humane society, each man is able to fulfil those obligations according to his own inclinations and abilities. But in a country like South Africa, it was almost impossible for a man of my birth and colour to fulfil both of those obligations. In South Africa, a man of colour who attempted to live as a human being was punished and isolated. In South Africa, a man who tried to fulfil his duty to his people was inevitably ripped from his family and his home and was forced to live a life apart, a twilight existence of secrecy and rebellion. I did not in the beginning choose to place my people above my family, but in attempting to serve my people, I found that I was prevented from fulfilling my obligations as a son, a brother, a father and a husband.

Obligations- a duty or a commitment

Civil- courteous and polite

Inclination- natural tendencies of behaviour

Inevitably- unavoidably

Twilight- half-light, semi-darkness

Secrecy- the action of keeping something secret

Rebellion- the action or process of resisting authority, convention or control

According to the author, every human being has its responsibility towards the family and as well as the society. Generally, under normal circumstances, a person can maintain the balance between the two but in countries like South Africa, it was never so easy. When a person of colour would come up for his society, he would be arrested and taken away from his family, thus keeping them from fulfilling both responsibilities. In the beginning, Mandela did not put his people over his family, but it was only later when he realised that in order to be there for his people, he was compromising his duties towards his own family.

I was not born with a hunger to be free. I was born free — free in every way that I could know. Free to run in the fields near my mother's hut, free to swim in the clear stream that ran through my village, free to roast mealies under the stars and ride the broad backs of slow-moving bulls. As long as I obeyed my father and abided by the customs of my tribe, I was not troubled by the laws of man or God. It was only when I began to learn that my boyhood freedom was an illusion, when I discovered as a young man that my freedom had already been taken from me, that I began to hunger for it. At first, as a student, I wanted freedom only for myself, the transitory freedoms of being able to stay out at night, read what I pleased and go where I chose. Later, as a young man in Johannesburg, I yearned for the basic and

honourable freedoms of achieving my potential, of earning my keep, of marrying and having a family — the freedom not to be obstructed in a lawful life.

Stream- a small, narrow river

Mealies- a maize plant

Abided- obeyed

Boyhood- the state or time of being a boy

Illusion- a false idea or belief

Transitory- not permanent

Yearned- have an intense feeling or longing for something

The author did not have the plan to stand against the apartheid system early in life. He lived his childhood like any normal child in South Africa. He only had to follow the rules set up by his father or the customs of his tribe. As soon as he grew up and began to learn the facts as to how people of colour are treated, he decided to stand against it. He had this urge for freedom from inside, earlier just for himself (staying out at night, etc.) and later for having a basic life not just for himself, but for everyone. In Johannesburg, they had to struggle for having a peaceful marriage, family and basic amenities which everyone has access to where law and order exists.

But then I slowly saw that not only was I not free, but my brothers and sisters were not free. I saw that it was not just my freedom that was curtailed, but the freedom of everyone who looked like I did. That is when I joined the African National Congress, and that is when the hunger for my own freedom became the greater hunger for the freedom of my people. It was this desire for the freedom of my people to live their lives with dignity and self-respect that animated my life, that transformed a frightened young man into a bold one, that drove a law-abiding attorney to become a criminal, that turned a family-loving husband into a man without a home, that forced a life-loving man to live like a monk. I am no more virtuous or self-sacrificing than the next man, but I found that I could not even enjoy the poor and limited freedoms I was allowed when I knew my people were not free. Freedom is indivisible; the chains on anyone of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all of my people were the chains on me.

Curtailed- reduce; impose a restriction on

Dignity- the state or quality of being worthy of honour or respect

Frightened- afraid or anxious

Monk- a member of a religious community of men typically living under vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience

Virtuous- having or showing high moral standards

Indivisible- unable to be divided or separated

Nelson Mandela joined the African National Congress (ANC) when he realised it is not only him whose basic rights were snatched away but of all those who looked like him. He had this

fire inside him to free his people from the injustice. It was this fire that changed the author completely as a man, from being scared to brave, a lawyer to the one breaking the law, a family-man to a man without a home and a lively man into being a monk. It was the knowledge that he and his people have restricted freedom that made him into a selfless man as opposed to before. According to him, freedom cannot be divided. Snatching it away from some was equivalent to taking it away from everyone and that meant taking it away from the author.

I knew that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred; he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity.

Prejudice- a strong dislike without any good reason

He mentions that the need to free the oppressor is as high as that of the oppressed because the oppressor is bounded by the shackles of hatred. He has the weight of all the people who he has tormented, for he carries the curses of all of their families. For taking away someone else's freedom and making them a prisoner, he becomes a prisoner of biasness. Thus, he is robbed of his humanity and need to be freed.

Summary of the Chapter:

This chapter is an extract from the autobiography of Nelson Mandela (born- 18 July, 1918), the first Black President of South Africa. It begins with the description of their inaugural ceremony which took place on the 10th of May 1994 where the entire nation along with many international leaders embraced the victory of a newly and fairly elected government. It involved speeches by the President and the two Deputy Presidents followed by an impressive air show of fighter jets and helicopters. Long ago, in the first decade of the twentieth century, white supremacy introduced the system of apartheid and made life a living hell for the dark-skinned population. It gave rise to one of the most inhumane societies of the world. Many people have struggled and sacrificed for basic human rights. The author expressed his desire to thank all those freedom fighters who couldn't live to see this autumn day. He referred to the citizens as the greatest asset of the country. It is these people he gathered his courage from. Mandela believes that courageous is not the man who is fearless, but the man who has overcome fear. He also mentioned the two responsibilities every human has and how in order to fulfil his obligation towards the society, his obligation towards his family was neglected. He became a man of people when he realised that the idea of freedom was an illusion for him and people like him. It was then he joined the African National Congress and fought for his rights till he became the first black President of the nation. According to him, the oppressor is as much a prisoner as the oppressed. As soon as the former robs the oppressed of their freedom he, himself gets robbed of his humanity. Thus, the oppressor too, is not free.