

Tracy Nneka Nnanwubar

Never About Her

I guess the first thing that struck me about the difference between a man and a woman is the fact that my brother can sit with his legs thrown apart; hanging freely through his trousers in what ever form he chooses. I, on the other hand, always have to sit with my legs closed, as a child and now, as a woman.

Only last week, I read an article in *The Guardian* newspaper about Yves Saint Laurent. Apparently, the writer was a Muslim responding to a previous article that celebrated the achievements of the French designer as the brain behind female trousers. This man called Yves Saint Laurent an evil, horrible man who is now perishing in hell because the designer went against the will of God to create men's clothing for women. The part about the article that shocked me and stopped me reading it altogether, was the part where he said that *The Guardian* is a newspaper published by Christians and as children of God, they should not be writing a tribute to an enemy of God. I am sure this contributor has never realized that the only item of clothing that gives me the physical and psychological freedom I need to function, is a pair of trousers. (By the way, I hope Yves Saint Laurent is drinking palm wine with God right now).

Thinking back, I also remember that the nanny I had at age twelve used to call me a sinner and made me kneel to pray for forgiveness to God each time my parents went to work. She believed I was headed for hell since my wardrobe was filled with trousers of all sorts, plus I wore them with pride. In fact, prior to the twenty-first century, many cultures in Nigeria (and some still do) believed that women who wear trousers are defying a divine rule. Of course, such hypocrites will quote the part of the Old Testament in the Bible which says a woman should not put on a man's garment and a man should not put on a woman's apparel. In that case, I guess these fanatics also believe all Scottish men are going to hell because their national attire is a kilt!

Even Rookkie, my classmate, agrees that a skirt imprisons a woman. Last week, she couldn't take twenty steps in one minute, as she usually does, because she wore a beautiful skirt that 'declared' her a woman, but this same skirt wouldn't allow her to explore the freedom of walking comfortably as a woman. The confinement of a woman to certain corners in the society has always nagged me, especially when women allow themselves to turn one another into victims of this oppression. I think my course mate's pregnancy and Ronke's drama at the market are the best ways to explain the neo-oppression of women—an ideology that encourages the woman to accept her denigrated role in the scheme of things.

I don't recall her name, but in my junior year of university, I took a course with this girl who majored in creative arts. She was a petite lady, about five feet four inches and couldn't possibly have weighed more than forty-five kilograms when we signed up for our creative writing class. She used to tell me how she was raised by a single parent and how her and her mum struggled to get through each day. According to her, my parents are celebrities and she admires the fact that I live a middle class life. She walked into the examination hall at the end of the academic year (I hadn't seen her in months) and there it was bulging through her cardigan. Her face was swollen and the rest of her body looked like she was stuffed with cotton wool. She had a swaggering gait as she walked and I noticed she hadn't zipped her trousers. Maybe she couldn't even afford maternity clothes.

Instantly, I blamed her for getting pregnant. I didn't know the story at all, but I felt she must have been stupid and undisciplined to allow a man to put anything inside her. Just like most people who are prejudiced about the challenges of womanhood, I didn't think to blame the man or wonder about his irresponsibility towards the girl he had impregnated. All I could think about was: *now she is pregnant and her life is over . . .* but the man is free and of course, he has abandoned her. Plus she has no job, little or no security for herself and the baby; she hadn't even graduated from the university! While concentrating on the physical evidence of an act that took two people to realize, I blamed my course mate for everything, but exonerated a man who I didn't even know. Just as I ignorantly

blamed my course mate for getting pregnant, so I blamed Ronke for asserting her rights in the market one day.

Twenty of us (eighteen students, my professor and the driver) had gone to the Accra market for shopping. While some went off to buy things, some remained behind in the bus. Ronke sat on one of the window panes and had her behind shooting out of the window of the school bus. I can imagine that it was a sight to behold because five minutes after she took that position, a passer-by tapped her behind. I bet it did not occur to him that the behind belonged to a woman who may not want unauthorized access to her assets. In seconds, Ronke ran out of the bus with a sachet of pure water in her left hand. With her front set of teeth, she tore open the sachet and splashed its liquid contents on the man. Quickly, she ran back into the bus and took cover under one of the seats while the man turned and searched for her. According to him, Ronke “violated” him and he made such a fuss about how he was wet all over. Now, I am surprised that he didn’t even care about how Ronke must feel for what he had done. Of course he wouldn’t care because he lives in a society that allows him to be the “violated” when he is the “violatee.”

This man started shouting at the top of his husky voice and threw sticks at our bus; he even tried to pull out the wipers and break the windshield. The scene he caused was purely chaotic because the next thing I knew we all started blaming Ronke for all the trouble. My professor actually called her a trouble-maker just because she tried to challenge a man who had clearly abused her body as a woman.

“Start the bus. This is getting ugly,” my professor toned above the noise.

Apparently, those students who went shopping had seen the crowd around the bus and scurried to join us as the driver started the ignition and made a u-turn to dash off. As we drove off, all I could hear the man saying was:

“Where is that stupid girl . . .? I will show her today!”

We all insulted Ronke for challenging the man. We told her it was lady-like to ignore the man. We told her it was normal to be treated that

way. We told her she was in the wrong by sitting with her behind sticking out. We told her to accept her position as a denigrated member of the society. We told her to be a woman. And yes, she was silent . . . not saying anything; just sitting at the back of the bus with a distant look in her eyes.