

Chattel Women—Nigeria, 2014

by A. Human Being (March 2016)

April 14, 2014: Chibok village in Borno State, Northern Nigeria

In another world to be sure . . . in a world made of sticks and straw, in a world made of idealized memory and imagined past . . . F'eh'mi had been a school girl who lived in a small round house, a clean and ordered house, with her father, a schoolmaster in Chibok village in Borno State, Nigeria.

F'eh'mi's father was a gray haired Muslim widower who hoped to find a new wife. However, this was difficult for him for two reasons: firstly, because in the Christian village of Chibok, his religion was a minority, and secondly, because it was well known that his religion treated women as property, forced the hijab and even genital mutilation on them in the region. Certainly, it would be impossible to find a Christian woman in Chibok who would be so backward as to tolerate the vulgarities of such barbarism.

But F'eh'mi's father, Al-Sarakhsi, was a progressive Muslim, he was an educated schoolmaster who enjoyed the poetry of Langston Hughes and kept a framed picture of Eleanor Roosevelt not only in their quiet ochre-colored round house on the outskirts of Chibok, but brought it to the school where he taught. "And why?" he would ask the boys and girls, Christians, Muslims, and Yoruba alike, who all studied together in one classroom. Because they knew him well, boys and girls, Christians, Muslims, and Yoruba alike, would answer, "Because Eleanor Roosevelt led the U.N. delegation that created the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

"Coooooorrect!" he would say, emphasizing the word with a swish of his arm.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was one of the great themes of al-Sarakhsi's class, as everyone at the Government Secondary School well knew. "It was designed," he would tell his students, "*and this is very fascinating, so listen up . . . in the shape of an ancient Greek temple. And that's a fact! It has a foundation, steps, four columns, and a pediment.*" And he drew a picture of a Greek portico on the blackboard.

"Articles one and two are, *this here*, the foundation, you know. Above it, the

seven paragraphs of the preamble are the steps. The main body of the declaration is the four columns. And my memory is not what it used to be, so you must help me boys and girls. What are those four columns of this here Greek temple that we love so much . . . what are they, my children?"

And in his class . . . *because this wasn't simply an intellectual idea that could be unappreciatively discarded, but was a declaration of the most paramount importance* . . . the secondary schoolchildren in Chibok village in Borno State, Nigeria had memorized and would stand up in his class, one by one, to speak:

"The rights of individuals, such as the right to life and the repudiation of slavery;"

"My rights and your rights in civil and political society;"

"All our rights with regard to spiritual, social, and political freedoms; the assertion that my thoughts and conscience are my own;"

"Every human being's social, economic, and cultural rights, *Amen!*"

Indeed, brothers and sisters! These are the values that children honored in al-Sarakhsi's classroom. And maybe these values would seem passé or redundant to a jaded Western cynic, but here in al-Sarakhsi's classroom they were recognized for what they were . . . *vital . . . reverential . . . sacred!*

Yes! Four months earlier, on International Human Rights Day, the old schoolmaster had bought cake for his entire class and had the students read out loud and reflect on the entire document. And there were some big words in that document and even bigger ideas.

So young red-cheeked Dele stood up and read: "Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, ..."

Bravo, Dele! Bravo!

Young Idowu in her pretty pink dress stood up and read: "Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been

proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people, ...”

Bravo, Idowu! Bravo!

Al-Sarakhsi had his students read and contemplate the entire Declaration, from its opening preamble to its final word.

And why? Because, as he saw it, without such a declaration, and without people who cherish its values – *even above their own divisive sectarianisms* – not only Nigeria, but all of Africa would fall imperiled. And what of the Middle East, Asia, indeed, the whole World, that singular sphere? Each tribe, each village, each nation, each region, he knew, would rise or fall dependant on the universal adherence to the sacrosanct principles of *this* document.

He was a Muslim, *yes, and he fulfilled his prayers*, but he wasn't fool enough to believe that the Quran offered any comparable moral clarity. He had eyes and ears, didn't he? He knew what loomed on the horizon. Every day there were more murders. And he knew that the Christian widows of Chibok village were right to distrust him as a Muslim. He respected them for their caution and good sense.

He knew that it was up to him . . . *if he was to continue as a Muslim*, and even that, he recognized as his choice . . . *to be the reformation* that his religion so desperately needed. He would not continue in backwardness. He would not expect, nor demand, that every other human being on the planet cave in to the backwardness of any provincial intolerance or medievalism.

And because F'eh'mi lived in a house where this beautiful man, her father, believed in these freedoms, she was able to chose . . . *of her own volition* . . . not to wear the veil. Again, because F'eh'mi lived in a house where her father believed in these freedoms, she studied hard – *very hard* – in order to get the Western education that her father dreamed for her.

To the younger boys and girls of Chibok village, F'eh'mi was a teacher herself. She had been for four years the leader of a club that patrolled the village to sweep away stagnant water and educate people about the importance of mosquito nets for malaria prevention.

And how would the people of Chibok village describe F'eh'mi? How did they see her? What would they say?

The people of Chibok village would say that they were proud of her. That she was an exceedingly kind girl. That she wouldn't simply tie the shoes of the younger children, but that she would, each and every time, do her best to teach them how to tie their own shoes. They would say that she didn't only braid the hair of the girls her age, but that she would braid the hair of the old and infirm, like Ms. Olaiya who was suffering from HIV and Ms. Ndibe who was debilitated after a stroke. She would braid their hair and sing to them, *and if truth be told*, she would sing in a terribly squeaky voice. And despite being sixteen years old, her voice was still in the middle of change. Her voice was neither this nor that. It was in-between. It would change of course . . . *given time*.

The people of Chibok village would say that F'eh'mi was studious, and that she got her good study habits from her father. Some of the traditional women might have vacillated between jealousy and pride at her facility with spoken and written French as well as English and Kibaku. But none of them would interfere if she were to teach a little French diction to their children. *And what of her cooking?* They'd say it was good, but not exceptional. And with a laugh perhaps, they might say that she was a fairly good striker in football.

"A girl with great things ahead of her," they'd say. "A girl with a future."

Indeed! The hope for the world!

A girl I've got to protect, her father, the old schoolmaster al-Sarakhsi, would reflect. And he wasn't a man for idle reflection. He was a man with a good sense for how the political climate was changing in northern Nigeria. He knew that it was only a matter of time before educated girls would be rounded up for rape or slaughter. This was already happening! All around them! Didn't the words Boko Haram translate to "Western education is forbidden"? And that could only mean terrible things in a constitutional republic whose lingua franca was English. Again, it did *in actuality* mean very terrible things in every respect in villages and cities all around them. So, as soon as he could, al-Sarakhsi secured his daughter a passport and asked all his foreign friends how he could get his daughter safely out of the country.

Increasingly, it seemed that it was the end of the world for Nigeria. It was a holocaust. It was the collapse of all human sensibilities to the most horrendous atrocities. "What type of human being could incite such genuinely monstrous

inhumanity?" he had asked the other schoolteachers.

This horror had been looming on the horizon for a while now. But it was no longer looming. It was the elephant in the room with them all. Everyone knew people – friends and relatives – who had been murdered by those terrorist ghouls.

Al-Sarakhsi found himself shrinking into his skin in the moral terror that his own religion was the ideological lynchpin for this whole mechanization of social evil and death worship. The escalation of Boko Haram's village raids, mass-murder, and assassinations was from any – *yes, absolutely any* – moral perspective utterly intolerable. Yes, *he would concede*, it wasn't without its historical archetype. For al-Sarakhsi, this was a matter of great theological anguish. The schoolteacher had secretly begun borrowing money, *a lot of money, seemingly insane amounts of money*, to pay for a plane ticket for F'eh'mi, so that she could get an education, and indeed live, outside northern Nigeria's nightmare of chronic terrorism – *and yes, again, with great difficulty he was forced to concede* – that it was, as it so often was now all around the world, *jihadist terrorism!*

Had the modern incarnations of his faith so completely forgotten the coherence of philosophers such as Ibn Sina, al-Farabi, and even al-Sarakhsi of Persia, the old schoolteacher's medieval namesake who had both tutored and been executed by the caliph al-Mu'tadid.

It was not too late, the schoolmaster believed, for his Muslim brothers to revisit al-Razi's theological speculations and utter denouncement of religious terrorism. Surely his convictions that Islam could, *again*, embrace the reason and skepticism of these great men was not purely the paradisaal fantasy of an old schoolteacher.

But then . . . this was all . . . *in another world to be sure, in a world made of sticks and straw, in a world made of idealized memory and imagined past!*

For now – *Now! Wake up! Wake up! This is not a dream! There is screaming all around you!* – it was the night of April 14th, 2014!

Students from many villages were there at the Government Secondary School awaiting the test for their Senior Secondary Certificate. They had worked hard

these young students, these young minds – *our shared hope for the future!*

But in a ruse, initially pretending to be the school's guards, Boko Haram's terrorists rushed into the girl's dorms and dragged the startled schoolgirls, like animals, into their waiting trucks. It had all been planned. But the chaos of the evening was unimaginable. Angry adult men with machine guns and military training punched, beat, and wrestled young girls into submission. They were wild-eyed ghouls, these upright things that barked and beat at the fragile children. How on earth could they behave this way, these murderous howling things that had forgotten basic humanity? As one less-than-bestial mind, they chanted the name of the horror that they worshiped, "Alaq akbar! Alaq akbar!"

Al-Sarakhsi, who had been sleeping in the administrators' housing, was awakened in utter terror at the sound of that death chant. This fine man, this teacher, headmaster, and father of a beautiful daughter whom he would never again see, rushed out of the room and toward the chaos of trucks, gunfire, knives, and booted bludgeoning uniformed ghouls. Although an old man, he grabbed and twisted the arm of one of those death-worshipers. Al-Sarakhsi struggled a valiant man's struggle with that hooligan host of kidnappers, rapists, and murderers. He held onto one child after another trying to pull them from the hands of madmen.

"Are you willing to die old man?" a terrorist asked him, flashing a knife in his face.

Even as a Muslim, as the murderer stabbed him . . . *and perhaps as his medieval namesake* . . . he answered, "The only death would be submission."

The above short story is a chapter from the forthcoming novel *War Verses: A Jihadist Fairytale* by A. Human Being.

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