

## **Out of slavery** [first published in Dutch in Trouw, 2014]

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*The slavery origins of theatre maker and philosopher Farida Nabibaks, born in Suriname, felt like an open wound. When she let in the pain, it deepened her humanity.*

Slavery was abolished in the Netherlands in 1863. That is a long time ago, but to me it still feels very present. Only five generations, five men and women separate me from it. Imagine: my grandmother's grandmother was the first in centuries to live in freedom. It is that close and yet so distant at the same time.

Because I don't know anything about the last slaves in my family or of the following generation. I lost that link. But I am connected to them through the trauma of slavery that we share. That still leaves its mark. In me as well.

What is that trauma? In one word: dehumanisation. Because who, or rather, what is a slave? A slave is a dehumanised person. Someone who believes they are no longer human. Because others forcibly took their humanity from them.

The worst thing I think, is that we continue to pass this on today. Unintentionally and unconsciously. I hesitate to claim this, but somewhere inside us, we maintain slavery. And as long as we don't confront it, it won't stop.

Please note, I am not making an accusation. But, if you reflect for a moment, you will understand that this is the reality.

Slavery has existed for centuries. Generations have educated each other, taught and learned that they are less. After all, you teach your child what you know. Dehumanisation has been imprinted. It is inevitable.

That is how it has become embedded, it has become the framework through which I see myself and others, the way I have come to see the world. This framing took hold, unconsciously. And it continues to shape our perceptions.

It is only when we see this and free ourselves from it that slavery really ends.

It is unconscious, but not inexpressible. I see it in daily behaviours that we rarely notice.

### **Commanding tone**

For example, we Surinamese talk to each other in a commanding manner. It is not a pleasant tone, but one that says: your will doesn't count. But look again and the tone makes sense: we have been talked to that way for hundreds of years. If you understand that, you can stop this behaviour, transcend this inheritance, and find your own voice.

I see this legacy in both my own family and in myself.

My grandmother was born at the beginning of the last century in the district of Saramacca, a poor farming area with many plantations. As a young girl, she and her sister

went to live with a white family from Paramaribo, to do the housework. Slavery may have been abolished by then but the work still lay in wait.

The family adopted my grandmother and her sister. Well, that's how it was presented. They did not bear their name. They received a good education, learned to play the violin and to speak proper Dutch. But they were not equals. They had to do the house work, unpaid. The white sisters did not work.

If the white sisters had gone out, my grandmother had to wash their dusty feet. On her knees. Then, keeping their foot beside her, they said, "Even my dirty foot is whiter than your face."

During slavery, planters had children with female slaves. Shades of skin colour became important; the lighter, the better. Unconsciously you knew: white was good.

When I look in the mirror I notice how deeply this still affects me. My father is Hindustani. I used to sit for hours while my grandma combed my hair. How beautiful she found it: I had good hair, because it was smoother.

I myself was and am not satisfied: my hair may be smoother, but it is not entirely smooth. It's texture is kinky. And kinky is not good.

I find it difficult to state this so explicitly. It sounds so harsh. I do not want to condemn us. I just want to show what is there. How entangled we are, how we are perpetuating old patterns. So that we become aware and can free ourselves.

I am a student of the Greek philosopher Epictetus. A slave himself, he saw it clearly: we experience the world through a framework, through ideas. And behave accordingly. But those ideas are often wrong. And so is our behaviour.

I still carry the frame of enslavement in me, I know that now. And I am not alone. It has taken on a life of its own. In us, but not of us. We can shake it off, if we want to see what's really there

And that is difficult. Because slavery was abolished 157 years ago, we find it difficult to connect with. Which is not so strange: it not only happened a long time ago, it also happened on the other side of the world. So, it swiftly becomes something of them, distant from us.

But it is ours. Of the Dutch and the Surinamese. Do you realise: Surinam did not exist before slavery. Surinam was created by the Netherlands. Founded as a big sweatshop to provide the people here with luxury products. And it was fundamentally about money.

Not only we, the descendants of slaves, pass on an old, unconscious mindset. In the West, money still counts more than a human life. That is how the market works, we say. But who are the traders? Consider this: significant abuses may be an inherent part of behaviours that we deem normal; atrocities to which we are collectively blind.

And there, in those abuses, lies my origin. Facing that, unleashed great pain.

For me everything started with the discovery: I am ashamed of my colour.

Seven years ago, I created the choreography for a play about shame. In preparation, we had to write down what we are ashamed of.

And I wrote, "I am ashamed of my colour."

Until then, I hadn't realised that. Shame poured out of my pores. An intense feeling of nothingness overcame me, engulfed me. I felt so miserable. Both because of what I felt, but also because I didn't want to feel it.

Slavery was never an issue for me. Neither was colour. I thought. Until that moment. Then I realized: my colour represents 'being less than'. I belong to the group that is considered inferior. And I do not want that. Because I am not that.

Look, we don't want to own this, because we are civilised, but colour brings a framing with it. Dark, black is framed as inferior. Then and now.

And it is that framing that has made slavery possible. The entirety of slavery is bound to colour, to that inferiority. Because the people who were superior – white – appropriated the right to dispose of those who were inferior – black. After all, they weren't real people.

It was then that I realised that I am aligned with dehumanised people. I felt the pain of being dehumanised. And was ashamed to my bones for my heritage. I wanted to be good, have a nice origin. Not this misery.

I have not yet overcome my shame, I still see it in my colour every day. To be clear: I am not ashamed of my own colour. I like it. I'm ashamed of what it stands for: my origin. And I am sorry that I cannot erase my shame: my colour testifies to it. Not being able to hide it, makes it all the more painful. It creates a great vulnerability that everyone can see: I am descended from slaves.

I now see that I have tried all my life to cover up my heritage. But all those generations of enslaved people before me, that is what makes me, me. They are stored in my genes and in my colour. However painful to accept: this is where I come from. In order to reclaim my humanity, I first have to find my own strength.

In this way, slavery changed from an old and distant story into something personal that touched me personally.

I could not read about it, I couldn't stand watching images of violence. This was done to my family, every blow or punch. I received them myself. At my diaphragm I had a physical pain for a long time, like an open wound. When I dared to look at the pain, it fell apart into sorrow, humiliation, anger, but most of all, an impotence that crushed me. That is how I knew: slavery is not over yet. If it were, it wouldn't hurt so much.

Because if something hurts you, there is a lasting wound. And our wounds are usually unprocessed pain from our past. Epictetus argues that such pain shapes our unconscious and helps make us who we are. And it turns out, that pain can go back a long way.

When I understood that, I knew: this wound is in me, but it isn't all that I am. My liberation begins when I release the pain. Then I am no longer a victim. But I need the perpetrator, to be able to do that. Perpetrator and victim are chained together. Only by acknowledging themselves and each other, can they both be free.

### **Not free**

Is the Netherlands free? Without wanting to criticise: I don't think it is. Why else do we know so little about our own history of slavery? A free person is not ashamed, a free nation acknowledges its mistakes.

It saddens me that it is so difficult to understand each other regarding this issue. That we think in terms of 'them' and 'you'. It is so important for Surinamese, Antilleans and Dutch people, and none of us can resolve it alone.

But I don't want to impose a change. I want to take humanity as a starting point. I did this in my musical theatre piece 'Bewogen weerspiegeling', ('Reflection in Motion'), in which I invited the audience to experience how the past still shapes us. Because we are the source of everything. We make the world what it is. Not the system, but people did this to each other.

What if it had been the other way around, if black had been superior and white inferior, would it have turned out differently? I find it difficult, but I don't think so. Ultimately, it is human to dehumanise. I also carry a slave owner in me.

As I said earlier, we do not know ourselves as well as we think that we do. We are not only light, we are also dark. It takes courage to face ourselves. I would perpetuate the unconscious model if I didn't show how those patterns still enchain us today. Then I would have eschewed my responsibility. And, with that, my freedom.

Freedom. We usually link freedom to money, to being able to do what you want. But do not forget, slavery originated in money. Freedom and dehumanisation are not so far apart.

Along with Epictetus I say: freedom, like slavery, is in the mind. Freedom is about being human. Be the best version of yourself, become who you are.

Becoming aware of what you don't know, will eventually make you more human.