

WOMANHOOD

By: Hayley Lam

I'm sitting on the subway, and the stranger across from me is openly staring at my bare legs. His gaze crawls up and down my body. It doesn't really help, but I cross my ankles and fold my hands together so my arms cover my thighs. He smirks at me. I want to snap at him, but the train is empty besides the two of us, and as much as I hate to admit it, I'm scared of how he would react if I did.

As a writer, I often think about the universality of my writing. I think anyone who has ever engaged in creative work is likely to have pondered the same. When I write, I make every effort to be honest, but there are times that I'm afraid to do so because I worry about how it will be received. So for a long time, I avoided writing about being a woman and the genuine anger I harbour about the experience. I felt that it required a delicate touch, and I dawdled over how I could make it more digestible, less angry, more of an appeal, a plea, than a rant. But I would be lying if I said I wasn't angry. They say tears are a woman's weapon. And it's true that womanhood brings me sorrow, but

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That anger can be difficult to describe, because women are often taught to suffer the aggressions we face in silence. But the next time you are amongst a group of people, take the liberty to observe how they react when someone says something slightly awkward or offensive, causing the atmosphere to stutter a little. In my experience, it is usually a woman, or several women, attempting to smooth over the encounter by smiling, laughing politely, or kindly acquiescing with the culprit. We are, from a young age, socialised to be agreeable

and take care of others, both physically and emotionally. How many children's toys designed for girls are centred around caregiving, like dolls and cooking sets? How many women and men in your life — count them separately — are people pleasers? Sometimes, what we experience manifests not in the form of verbal or physical harm, but in the way we smile in uncomfortable situations, or not speak up when male superiors make inappropriate comments. Men are allowed to exist, while women are taught to please. Men take shape, while women bend and mold into whatever space that is left. That reticence, of course, is not voluntary. From the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* to the 'bear or man' question that circulated social media platforms, the unrelenting reminders of how frightening it is to be a woman are unavoidable. The newest, and yet wholly unsurprising, development from the proliferation of artificial intelligence is that many women have become victims of image generation tools. I don't know which makes me more angry: that this happens at all, or my own helplessness. I would say that all this is

unprecedented, but truthfully, it is not. Somehow, progress is not merely stalling, but retreating.

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I want to honour every woman who identifies as an ethnic minority by saying: to be a woman in our world as it is today is a formidable prospect, but to be both a woman and a minority in America is downright terrifying. It took moving here for me to realise that being a woman means being subjected to the scrutiny of the public in ways a man never is. But that experience is exacerbated by my identity, or more specifically, my blatantly East Asian appearance. As proud as I am now to be Asian, I have never thought of myself as an Asian woman before moving abroad. Why would I? Everyone around me was Asian. The instant I stepped foot into America, however, being an Asian woman became

the leitmotif of the novel that is my life. Because of it, I get less attention, but also more attention, depending on the context. Catcalling, for example, usually involves lewd imitations of Mandarin, Japanese, or Korean along with the typical sexualised content. Being a woman and being a minority have many similarities, and they intertwine and amplify each other, pressuring me — us — into silence.

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I don't represent every woman, nor am I familiar with all their experiences. But I do know what it's like to make sweet, polite excuses to turn a man down because you're afraid he'd react poorly otherwise. I know the unease of walking through an unknown neighbourhood late at night, and how it feels to look back and realise a particular incident involving men was much more

serious than you previously thought. And I know that almost every woman in my life, minority or not minority, has lived through a similar story. We deserve a world where that isn't true, where fear is not a universal experience for half the population. A world where we can take the subway alone late at night without feeling scared. We have become angry, and we should be angrier still. We deserve it. We deserve better.

Hayley is a senior studying Psychology. She has been writing for Generasian since her first semester at NYU. This piece is dedicated to anyone who has experienced womanhood, in all its joys and vulnerabilities. To Asian women everywhere: You are seen, and you are loved.