

Foreword

On a fine spring morning a cool breeze rustled through the trees. I looked up at the azure sky and was struck by the beauty of the season, suddenly becoming aware of something that we do not normally give pause for thought.

We are a species that loves to classify everything into neat categories. Thus, we have a 'summer' and a 'winter'; we evolved through the 'Bronze' age and subsequently through the 'Iron' and 'Industrial' ages, on our way to the 'Technology and Information' age. We segregate ourselves into discrete races, religions, nations and regions, often bringing these diverse groups into conflict. However, there is one distinction that is so deeply ingrained into our psyche and so fundamental to our thought process that we are never even consciously aware of – being a man or woman and the fact that gender is a privilege.

Brought up as boys or girls, we position ourselves in society as men or women, assuming those qualities that are thought to be the domain of our respective sex. Thus, men are considered to be assertive, forceful and ambitious while women are supposed to be nurturing, caring and accommodating – the two genders at diametric opposites. Scarcely is any thought given to the eventuality of a continuum, a gradation of the scale where all qualities blend in various degrees

to form a harmonious whole, the way that Mother Nature had intended us to be. A 'complete' man or a 'complete' woman is a fallacy, since no man is devoid of love and caring, just like no woman lacks ambition and drive. Yet every person is thought of as one or the other at a subliminal level wherever we interact. We even force ourselves to exhibit only those traits that are attributed to our gender and suppress those that could be remotely associated with the other gender.

When confronted by someone who cannot be classified as either gender or who exhibits the dominant psychological traits of one gender while manifesting the physical characteristics of the other, our penchant for rigid classification is suddenly thrown into disarray. People cannot comfortably deal with those that cannot be clearly categorised, since they are unsure of which qualities of the other person they can identify with. Also, the lack of meaningful interaction leads to being judgemental against a predetermined benchmark. The usual response has been to brush the issue under the carpet and avoid any mention of it. In those situations where interaction with a person of ambiguous gender is unavoidable, the exchange is characterised by uneasiness and a desire to terminate it as soon as possible. The unfortunate community of eunuchs is forced to live on the fringes of society, despised and feared, never loved and welcomed. They eke out a living by either appealing to our mercy and sometimes, pity or by offending our sensibilities.

I was rather pleasantly surprised when I was presented with this book. Finally, someone has the vision and courage to present the facts dispassionately and without preconceived notions. The book addresses most issues about the causes of the abnormality, the physical and psychological aspects of dealing with it and perhaps leading to social acceptance of these people. Substantial research has gone into tracing their presence through history, their singular lifestyle, culture, rituals and traditions, social attitudes towards them as well as their hopes and desires.

It is only with this unbiased information and attitude that one realizes that gender too is a gift of God, like height, weight, hair quality etc. The lack of a clear gender is not an abnormality. It brings to the forefront how society has deformed this will of God into an ugly stigma and I hope the understanding of this through the book will go a long way into recasting our thoughts and align them to the more humane ones, the way we desire to be treated ... with respect.

At least in my case, the book made me sit up and take notice of how misinformed I had been about these hapless people and how cruelly society at large deals with them. It definitely changed my attitude from one of indifference to a sympathetic one and dispelled all those baseless fears lurking within.