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Word from the ‘Wart
19th May 2018

Why do we stare? A friend from a progressive, social-welfare generous country once said to me, “I could never marry you. No one in my country looks like you”. That was 40 years ago. I asked years later about this comment to which he updated, “Well, we see many adopted Korean orphans now.” Attitudes are slow to change. How can such comments be so casually tossed around? Why do I still remember after so long? Because it sounds ... all so outrageous.

Another slow burn is the commonly known story of Indian Buddhist bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara,¹ who changes from male to the female Quan Yin,² the now widely worshipped Chinese deity. How did that happen? It could be that in the worshippers’ sojourn from India throughout China and Southeast Asia, Avalokiteshvara’s gender reassignment evolved to suit a local view of who “looks” more believable delivering compassion, mercy and protection. Somehow, crying for help in a fire or shipwreck feels better when praying to a female, motherly figure. In Buddhist art, Avalokiteshvara is sometimes shown with eleven heads, a thousand hands and eyes on the palms of each hand. His thousand eyes allow him to see human sufferings and his thousand hands, to reach out to save.³

That Avalokiteshvara/GuanYin gender assignment is supposed to have taken centuries, across many lands. Today, few worshippers fuss over this gender change. Even fewer stare at GuanYin like some freak show item.

How do we teach our children, how do we tell ourselves ... not to stare? But to accept and respect others for who they are, never mind how they look. All very magnanimous to preach but often so difficult to practise. Is it all right to ask “what’s your story”? The journey of gender assignment can’t never be taken lightly. It can’t seem to just about a mental state. It is years of treatments and surgeries, at great financial and emotional costs. Back to the Hindu religious pantheon, Ardhanarishwara, a composite androgynous form of Shiva and his consort Parvati, is depicted as half male (Shiva, on the right) and half female, split down the middle. Nonetheless, it doesn’t mean that India today is a haven for the transgender/transvestite community. Eminent Indian photographer Dayanita Singh documented eunuch or *hijra* Mona Ahmed’s story of struggles and rejection in her long-term project that culminated in her book, *Myself Mona Ahmed*, published collaboratively by Ahmed and Singh.⁴ India’s Supreme Court in 2014 recognised *hijra* (including transgender, eunuchs, intersex people) as “third gender,” as have other South Asia countries. I recently saw a Singapore exhibit about our Bugis heritage that explains that that tradition references five genders. The plot thickens! Singapore has long allowed for a transgender individual to legally change his/her gender and reflect so in identity cards.

So why are we still staring?

¹ Avalokiteshvara is a major bodhisattva (one who is able to reach nirvana but delays doing so to free human beings from suffering), one who leads and guards the world in the interval between the departure of Buddha (Gautama) and the appearance of the future buddha, Maitreya.

² Translated from Chinese, "Kuan Shih Yin" or Quan Yin is “kuan” - to observe, “shih” - the world (of sufferers), and “yin” sound, our crying sounds pleading for help.

³ *Kuan Shih Yin - Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva The Bodhisattva of Great Compassion*. Buddha Dharma Education Association & BuddhaNet. Accessed April 2018, <https://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/kuanyin-txt.htm>

⁴ “It’s her story” *The Hindu*. 3rd February 2002 (accessed 9th May 2018) <http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mag/2002/02/03/stories/2002020300230400.htm>