

Dismantling gender boxes

Right to complex sexual identities

Daily Star



The Caster Semenya story left many South Africans feeling confused whilst also strongly sympathising with Semenya in *her* humiliating experience. **Zethu Matebeni** discusses the experience of intersexuality in the form of a letter to Semenya and deeply challenges our notions of sexuality.

Dear Caster,

I wanted to salute your resilience.

Most people have focused on your life as an outstanding athlete, and a publicly announced intersex person. But I salute your resilience for being among the few South Africans I know who challenge our conformist notions of gender and sex binaries.

For some of us, your experience, as harsh as it is, could have been a moment for us South Africans to actually negotiate our own stereotypes and fixed notions about what it means to be a man/woman or feminine/masculine and explore alternatives to these elusive and suffocating binaries.

After reading a series of reports about your life as an athlete and your gender being speculated on and investigated, I thought about the many women whose stories about gender and sexualities I have listened to over the past few years. Your story reeks of familiarity, everyday occurrences that many of us experience in our own localities.

It evokes my own experiences of going to petrol stations and being addressed as 'eita boss' by the petrol attendant because he assumes my shaved head, lack of make-up and jewellery, represent a man's body. When I get out to clean the windscreen, with embarrassment written all over his face, he looks down and mutes 'sorry sisi'. My only response at that moment would be 'sharp boss' and I'd watch him focus his gaze on my lower body.

This illustration is tiny compared to your story and your experiences, Caster. Your life has become a spectacle and an opportunity for many to push their own agendas or vindicate their own mishaps.

Many of the women's stories I've listened to are similar to yours, but unlike you, many of these women do not get public attention or any form of protection and privilege, as complex as it may be, from our state. Like you, they are similarly humiliated on a daily basis, but refuse to let these public outbursts and resentments put them down.

Take Aza for example, a 24-year-old part-time model and accountant who recounts the experience of finding her body not fitting her gender expressions. Aza was born a boy and quickly realised that her body was not in sync with her gender. While in high school, her teachers as well as her mother supported her transition to being a girl. Aza now lives a complete life as a feminine woman.

Aza is like any girl from next-door, *icherie yasekasi*: 'You know honestly having a vagina does not necessarily make me a woman, just as much as having a penis does not necessarily make me a man, understand? So growing up my focus was like – a woman to me was her vagina. I needed to have a vagina – that is what was going to make me a woman. But having grown up now, I mean – it has become an irrelevant part of my anatomy because I'm very comfortable with my body right now.

(Back then) I did not want to look at my body when I was

dressed and see a man there. Obviously I was born a male... I'm always going to be androgynous, one way or another, which I have come to terms with. But in terms of the sex change, the full sex change... I think if I do that I won't be doing it for myself, I will be doing it to please someone else actually because I'm a full woman and I am comfortable with my body. I am, I really am!

I will allow you to use your own imagination about what happens to Aza when people, and men in particular, discover that she is a boy. You can also imagine the kinds of harassment she deals with everyday as she takes a taxi to work or a photo shoot. She continues to tolerate a series of punishments in a society that supposedly celebrates diversity. None of these get her down. She carries her head high, walks tall and claims her womanhood and her femininity.

Similarly, Ace is an 18-year-old township soccer player, as the nickname suggests. Ace used to play in a boy's soccer team until a few years ago. When *her* teammates found *her* too challenging and beating them in a game they thought they could no longer have Ace in their team. (Note that I use italics to show that some of these pronouns are not relevant or fitting in people's lives. Various pronouns such as *hir*, *hes*, *she* have been used or suggested as alternatives for those who are gender non-conforming. I do not use these because these debates are in their infancy. Italics are a way of opening up possibilities for gender and sex pronouns.)

Ace, *she* is now the best player in a woman's soccer team outside *her* township. Everyday on *her* way to soccer training Ace has to answer questions about who *she*

is; people call *her* names, ridicule *her* and intimidate *her*.

Men find it difficult to understand that Ace is a woman. They cannot fathom how *she* can choose to live *her* life independently of men and can look, dress, walk and talk as well as any other guy on the streets, a real *Jijita lasekasi*.

What is interesting about Ace is that *she* can never forget that *she's* a woman. Society reminds her of this everyday in how *she* is supposed to look, talk, dress and carry *herself*— how *she* has to express being a woman. But in some ways, *she* doesn't fit neatly into the box that has been created for women. Rather, *she* dismantles these gender boxes and leaves everybody uncomfortable.

What is common in all these experiences is young people who are forced to fit into boxes that others have created. These boxes don't fit and not fitting in them comes at a cost.

For both Aza and Ace, their lives are constantly under scrutiny, under public gaze and surveillance. This is a gaze that asks your sex or gender to choose one polar extreme or the other. When either of those fail, you represent scandalous ground. This is problematic for our society because assumptions and conclusions are drawn based on observation. Society expects you to be what they see. If you are different to that expectation, you are cast aside by our society. You are ostracised because you challenge stereotypes that people hold firmly and believe in. You disrupt what people believe to be 'natural' binary systems: woman|man; female|male, homosexual|heterosexual; feminine|masculine. Anything in between and outside that is too much for people to handle.

I don't even want to imagine what kind of stories would go around when you, Caster, fall in love. I would hope that for once, our media would let you enjoy that moment on your own and maybe restore the bit of dignity and respect that is owed to you.

When people hear and read about intersexuality, they tend not to really hear because it's outside their frame of binary reference. This is disturbing given that statistics show that one in 500 South Africans are born with some form of intersexuality.

I cannot help but ask: when there's so many of us, so what's the fuss about? In my world, you, Caster, are not really different. You're just a super talented individual who deserves celebration and honour. You're like our own Joan of Arc, a spirit and force to be reckoned with. You, like Aza and Ace break boxes and allow for deeper imagining. You have taken up the tough task to challenge conventional gender and sexuality conventions and leave us all questioning and wondering about ourselves and our fixation with the 'natural'. This is why I salute you.

Maybe one day our society will allow us the right to own our identities, in their complexities. And maybe on that day we can all truly claim to live under the Rainbow of diverse and unified identities, where we will all be 'other' and no one can oppress another. LB

A great admirer,
Zethu Matebeni

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