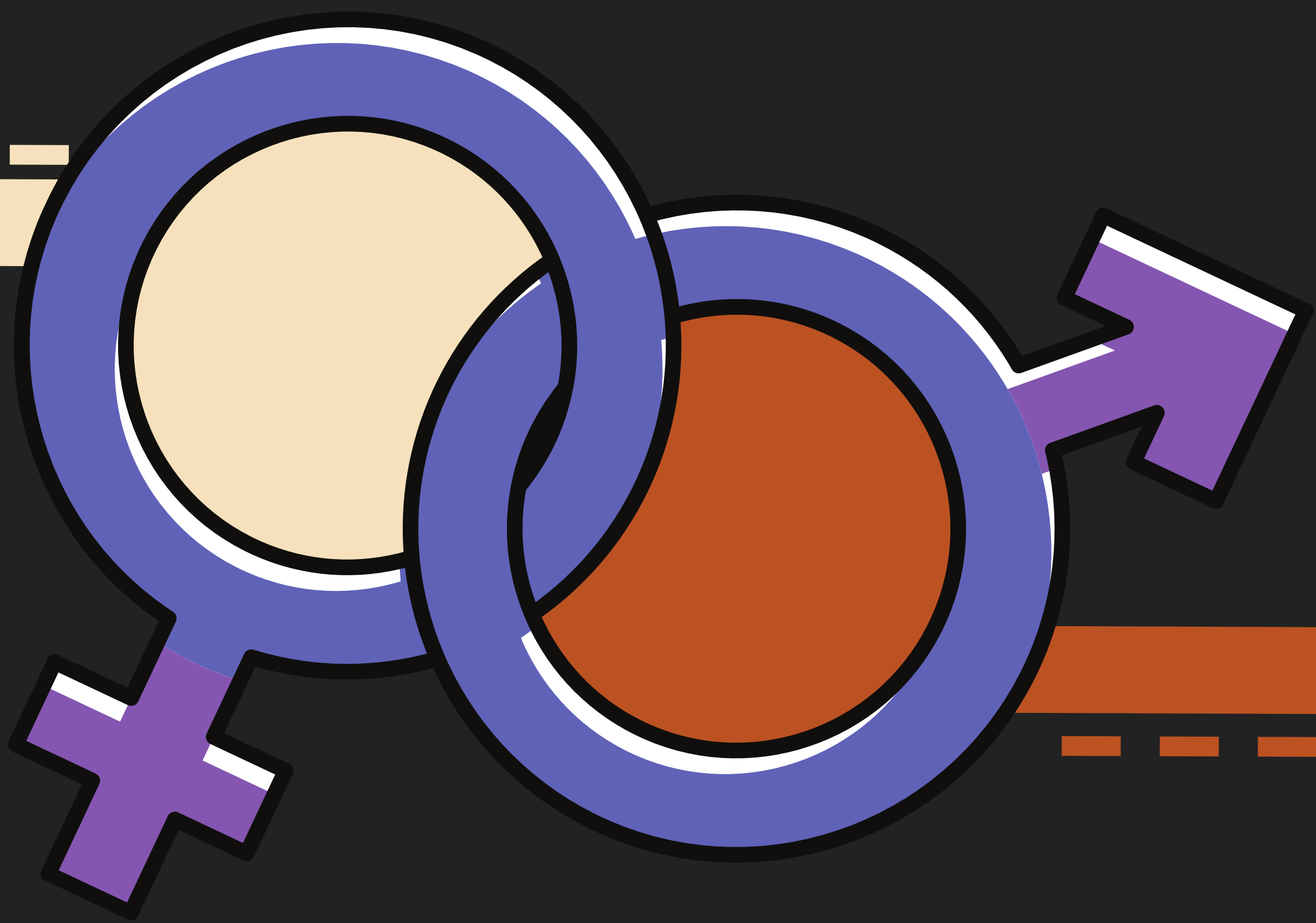# STEPPING OFF THE GENDER WAGON:

The Freedom of Disengaging from Society's Gender Construct

A TALK FOR TRANS LONDON

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Stepping Off the Gender Wagon:

The Freedom of Disengaging from Society's Gender Construct

In their book, Beyond the Gender Binary, gender non-conforming writer, performance artist and public speaker, Alok Vaid-Menon describes their experience of wearing a dress in public for the first time. It's a moment that captures how it feels to fully embrace who we are – a feeling that most of us in this zoom room will have felt, and a feeling that I hope everyone the world over will get to feel at some point in their life.

"I had never felt more giddy and carefree… I stopped thinking about my body and focused on the things around me. It felt like a reunification of my mind, my body, and my spirit – for the first time in a long time, I was able to be completely present with myself and the world. I had so much more energy and motivation. There was a quiet there, a sense of peace in my body, which had for so long been full of anxiety."

Isn't it incredible that that's what I get just from adding one little word to my identity?

Western society has assigned certain qualities, likes, dislikes, personality traits, ambitions, careers, behaviours and appearances into two neatly-defined categories. Pink for girls, blue for boys. And if we don't align with those set guidelines, society can make it pretty uncomfortable for us. Ultimately though, trying to squeeze ourselves into one of those boxes can be a most painful act. To live that way is to carve away parts of yourself, your true nature, on a daily basis, until the part of you that remains is nothing more than an ember. Luckily though, an ember is all it takes to light a fire. Recovering our true nature then, is essential to happiness, mental health and wellbeing, and entirely within our grasp. Through re-establishing a connection to Self and reaffirming who we are on a fundamental level, we are able to thrive, and the world gets a little brighter because of the fire we bring.

And how do we discover who we are? I believe two elements are essential: the ability to tune out society's drone of expectations for long enough to hear what your heart wants, and to know that what you want is possible. Hearing someone else's story is a great way to know that something you desire is possible. That's what kindled my curiosity, and led to my exploration and finally myself-acceptance. A story. The option of using a gender-neutral title. And stepping away from the people who blare out society's expectations and success criteria.

For me, it was fine being a tomboy as a kid, but once I got old enough and breasts started to sprout, society really upped its game on trying to get me to conform. There's a school uniform, for instance. Classmates bully you for wearing boys' clothes on mufti days. Parents… Trust me, every day society will find a way to influence your behaviour. Rewards for being quiet and passive, punishments for being 'too rowdy', 'unladylike', etc. Society has its own cues and punishments. Not all of them are obvious. All of them are insidious. Groups, neighbourhoods, clubs swell and form the same as in the animal kingdom: comply and conform and you're in; threaten the status quo and you're out. These rules become background noise, yet still they shape our behaviour. We live, unless we are very lucky, in a laboratory rat's maze – shocked for stepping outside the neat little lines of our gender, and rewarded for succumbing to it.

It's bullshit that some personality traits and jobs are deemed masculine. If I prefer those, does that mean I'm rejecting femininity? Does that mean I don't respect women? That I idolised my father and devalued my mother? Does it mean I'm not a feminist? Am I just, in fact, performing society's expected gender roles? Am I the one and not society who is insisting that I can't be female because I live outside what I think a female's role should be? Perhaps I should have stuck with the label 'woman' and fought through life being the kind of person I want everyone to feel comfortable being – one that isn't confined to a rigid set of rules and expectations. Maybe I would have done my part in breaking down society's gender expectations. But *nonbinary*… this feels comfortable to me.

Is my issue with accepting the label 'man' or 'woman' down to the connotations that those labels come with? If there were no associations with the words 'man' and 'woman', would I be happy to declare myself a woman? Probably? Fast-forward a hundred years and maybe everyone is just an individual and gender is self-assigned. Ultimately, biological sex shouldn't impact anyone's lifestyle or how they're treated by society. But that isn't the world we live in. In a weird way, I feel I'm better placed to smash the patriarchy because the patriarchy can't categorise me. It can't touch me with its set of outdated rules.

Nonbinary is a boundary I draw around myself to keep the patriarchy out.

Since coming out, my friends, family and colleagues have changed the way they react to me. They no longer offer creepy gendered comments. I can wear a shirt if I want to without people implying that I haven't made an effort or that I look like a teenage boy. Freedom. In the words of the great Jinkx Monsoon, I'm just me. My nonbinary-ness isn't in how I dress, what I'm into, how I fuck, or act or work, but through claiming the title 'nonbinary' for myself, it's given me the freedom to detach from society's gender stereotypes. I can play. I can breathe. All those parts of me that got carved away, I've reclaimed.

I deserve to experience the world with freedom from categorisation. And the world deserves me at full force, not giving a fuck about expectations. We are creative beings, and we create best when we are aware that there are, actually, no limits.