Male and female

It seems to me - -

by Margaret Duggan

A BRAVE "Play for Today" on BBC television last week sent me back to *Conundrum*, Jan Morris's autobiographical account of her transition from James Morris,, journalist and Everest-climber, to her present fulfilled female self. The play—*Even Solomon*, by Andrew Taylor — followed the same theme: a young trans-sexual bank clerk finally concluding that he had been born with the wrong sort of body and starting on the long road to a new sexual identity.

Trans-sexuality is a phenomenon which says something more profound about sexuality and gender than homosexuality, transvestism or any of the other alternatives to heterosexual orthodoxy. What the young man in the play said was the same as Jan Morris said in *Conundrum*: that perfect male genitalia notwithstanding, the conviction of being a female trapped inside a male body was so strong, of such long overwhelming and inexplicable importance, that there could be no peace, no feeling of being a complete human being, until a change in identity had been made.

James Morris first "knew" the mistake at four years old; and for the whole of his boyhood his daily prayer was "Please God, let me be a girl." At that time he knew virtually nothing of the physical differences between the sexes; he just knew his essential femaleness. "To me," he wrote as Jan Morris many years later, "gender is not physical at all . . . it is soul, perhaps, it is talent, it is taste, it is environment . . . inner music, it is the spring in one's step or an exchange of glances, it is more truly life and love than any combination of genitals, ovaries and hormones. It is the essentialness of oneself."

He joined the Army, he married and fathered five children, he climbed Everest with Hillary and Tensing, and roamed the world as one of the best-known and most-respected foreign correspondents; but it was not until he had his male organs removed in middle-age that he at last felt truly himself.

Trans-sexuality is an extreme of sexual ambiguity quite different from homosexuality; and it is further evidence that the human race is not, and never could be, neatly divided into two distinct sexes. Our maleness and femaleness operate on too many levels, as the medical chapter in the Gloucester Report on homosexuality makes clear. Only the biological facts of chromosomes, hormones and genitalia can be classified by the outside observer — and they come in many different combinations. Yet no one can deny that erotic orientation and preference are something else again and might have no apparent connection with biology, as with the sexual characteristics of personality.

The older I get the more I find that the most interesting, rewarding and creative people are not those who are extremely male or extremely female. The wholly masculine, beer-drinking sports fiend, only happy when propping up a bar with the boys or raping his women (in fact or fantasy), is as much a bore as the sex-object woman with no yearnings beyond domestic subservience. The man who is really attractive to women (as most romantic novels make clear) is the masculine man with the strong streak of tender vulnerability. Would Rhett Butler (Clark Gable or not) ever have been the romantic hero he was if he had not sprawled sobbing on Melanie's knee?

But to come back to real life: it is the combination of masculine toughness and feminine sensitivity which produces interesting personalities in both men and women. I am not talking about old women of both sexes, nor about whining and fawning infants of all ages and both genders. I am talking about normal and mature men who are not afraid to give rein to the sensitive and emotional side of their personalities; and women who, while remaining entirely feminine in manner and behaviour, have a breadth of interest and a masculine toughness of approach to the practical problems of life.

Most of the best clergy that I know have a strong feminine streak, which probably accounts for the embarrassing number of women who tend to fall in love with them. And any woman who, to me, would make an acceptable priest would have to have that quality of mind which I keep calling toughness and which I find hard to define other than as an insistence upon getting at the facts, on making decisions and taking risks.

Such a combination of characteristics has a divine precedent. Jesus was a man with all the tender feminine attributes of sympathy, gentleness and compassion. So equally divided does his personality seem between the masculine and the feminine that it suggests that it is somewhere near the middle of the gender spectrum that true wholeness lies.