

## Gender swap, cross-dressing, and androgyny in Oyin Olugbile's Sanya

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**Abstract:** Patriarchy and sexual politics have often been skewed against women in military and leadership roles. This paper discussed gender-swapping, cross-dressing, and androgyny as feminist templates that enable women to subvert patriarchy, actualise themselves, and serve society outside of the norm. The study aims to investigate how the feminism-propelled counter-narrative deployed in Oyin Olugbile's Sanya interrogates received myths and helps subvert stereotypes about women in military and leadership positions. Further, the paper aimed to explore the possibility that many African myths may carry within themselves, coded narratives about the forbidden roles of women in military and leadership positions. Using quantitative discourse analysis from a feminist standpoint governed by post-structuralist philosophy as research methodology, the study pursues intersections between myth, gender, and popular culture. Findings revealed that uncomfortable social truths banished from sanctified myths serve as creative repertoire for engendering 'subversive' literary forms. It also found that myths extend their relevance by infusing historical elements with contemporary nuances. The paper recommended more African myth-based creative interventions using new forms that would appeal to the modern-day generations. It suggested that such creative interventions help increase the literary corpus of Nigerian Literature and make for the continuing relevance of verbal performances/Orature in contemporary literary studies. The paper concluded that myths continue to serve society as ancient-in-modern templates which ensure generational relevance by interrogating received narratives.

**Keywords:** Androgyny, Cross-dressing, Genderswap, Myth, Popular culture

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### 1. Introduction

Patriarchy and sexual politics have often been skewered against women in military and leadership roles. Extant works on gender and the subjugation of women have paid sufficient attention to the mainstreamed docile, passive, and non-action-oriented roles assigned to women in most African communities. This study examines a subversion of these stereotypes. It aligns with Asuinura and Kipo-Sunyehzi (2024) who argue that patriarchy fuels wars which not only result in making women victims of wars but, conversely, throw them up as competent actors in wartime decision-making necessary for the peacetime dismantling of patriarchal systems, norms, and structures. The objectives and purposes of the study are to:

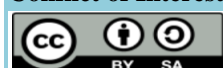
- Investigate narratives that subvert the common stereotypes against women in military and leadership roles
- Identify the link between folklore and modern gender narratives
- Examine how spinning the legend of Sango helps to expand the frontier of gender discourse in African literature.

Imagine that Sango, the tempestuous, fiery, double axe-wielding Yoruba god of thunder and lightning is gender-swapped, the spoiler alert through time being the aesthetics delineating red skirt and androgynous hairstyle now called mohawk. These mythical identifiers rendered in contemporary gender nuance, are akin to a macho man and Alpha male in red stiletto heels strutting through history

Imagine that this warrior of warriors who consumed his enemies by setting them ablaze was in reality a woman; a female warrior forced by the traditional restraints placed on the female gender at the historical time, to take on subterfuge,

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in the form of cross-dressing, to conceal her true identity and achieve purpose beyond that which society had assigned the woman.

Imagine that the Yoruba pantheon of gods, goddesses, and divine beings, the *Orisa*, not only know the truth behind the façade, being omniscient, but actively encourage the chicanery by gifting the counterfeiter a set of male clothing (Olugbile, 2022: 247) and, at the fulfillment of her human destiny, the gender-swapped Sango, is venerated and admitted into the pantheon as a god who is worshipped across the continents of the modern world. To date, Sango as the archetype for power, dominance, and imperious temper, commands a huge international following and devotees as a colourful image in traditional religion and popular culture. Ranging from Chant to the God of Thunder, an album released by Babatunde Olatunji in 1960, to the 2016 title in the album *No Borders* by Hugh Masekela and including an invocation in Aime Cesaire's play, *Une Tempete. In the New World*, Sango is syncretized with Saint Bernard and sometimes, as Saint Jerome. He is worshipped across nations from Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Latin America. He is venerated in Yoruba mythology, Brazilian Santeria religion, Haitian Vodou, and Louisiana Voodoo, and folk Catholicism. Furthermore, the Sango festival held in Oyo, Nigeria, which is supported by UNESCO, is an annual Yoruba Worldwide Homecoming.

According to the Collins dictionary, a swap is an act of exchanging one thing for another; to substitute one thing for another. By extended meaning as a literary device, swapping is used for perspective shifting by creating divergent interpretations. Using common symbols and identifiable aesthetics associated with a legendary figure such as Sango, but subjecting these to disparate representational explanations of a cultural essence, creative swapping often operates within the framework of myth as a form of expanding narrative options and generational relevance.

Roberts and Jacobs (1989: 802) define myths as stories that illustrate or define the religion, philosophy, culture, collective philosophy, or history of a specific group or civilization. These stories organize and formalize a civilization's social and cultural values. Mythical stories, therefore, have their roots in the belief system of their creators. Consequently, swapping is an ideological tool in the hands of the re(creator) of a received narrative. It is used to fulfill the recreator's beliefs and persuasions about a previously held concept or doctrine in a given social environment. Hence, swapping is a departure from the norm. However, it utilizes the common, well-known template as its springboard to its "deviant", subversive rendering of the inherited repertoire of shared experiences, symbols, and allusions. Swapping, therefore, helps writers create new ideas, images, and patterns that may be considered iconoclastic. By deploying swapping as a creative technique, writers create new legends to debunk ancient interpretations and, at the same time, project and propel new perspectives, increasing the corpus literati while shading new lights on supernatural figures.

Olugbile's (2022) rendering of the Sango legend refocuses it as a feminist narrative by drawing attention to the travails women had to go through in traditional societies in contrast to the hard-won female freedom enjoyed in contemporary times in the quest for female power within patriarchal subjugation. Using the trope of cross-dressing as the identity blurring and gender ambiguity popular culture imperative, Olugbile introduces androgynous temperament with the example of Sanya. This modernist intervention fits into movie warrior queen images popularized by the mass media such as Xena, Wonder Woman, Power Puff Girls, and many more. At the same time, she draws the reader's attention to the red flag raised by the historical depiction of Sango as a red skirt-wearing warrior King. And we wonder how we missed the cross-dressing indicator of a genderized truth; a truth glossed over through time by patriarchal control of knowledge transmission. Thus, while there have been diverse responses to the woman question in African literature, Olugbile brings fresh perspectives through swapping.

## **2. Background**

The course of this analysis investigated cross-dressing as a coping mechanism in the gender-swapped narrative in *Sanya*. It further discussed the various dynamics of swapping and its benefits to feminism. Finally, the paper explored the concept of androgyny as the ultimate female gender fantasy and a form of emergent urban myth within African realities. Relying on the traditionally accepted version of the Sango myth among the Yoruba of Nigeria, Olugbile exercised her poetic license as a myth-making animal (Anyanwu, 1987: 280) to invest new normative perspectives on the inherited, communal lore through creative subversion as advocacy for feminist interpretation of myth. Study findings reveal that this feminist rendition of myth exposed that divergent sexualities considered oddities are often repressed within social mores. Further, it showed the physical, emotional, and spiritual strains those who go against the gender construct adopt to live out their dreams within the many-layered bars of discrimination and limitations.

## **3. Literature review and definition of concepts**

### **3.1. Gender swap/gender switch**

The basic dictionary meaning of gender swap is the practice or act of assuming a different sex and/or gender identity than one's actual sex and or/gender identity. The fantasy about instantly switching one's biological sex and socially assigned gender for a limited period fascinates popular culture. Social media platforms such as Quora.com, apps like Tik Tok, and pseudo-academic blogs are awash with lifestyle questions like "If you were to swap genders for one day, what are the things you would like to do?" "You swap genders for a day, what is the first thing you do?" "What would you do if you were in a female body for one day?" "If you were able to swap genders instantly, how long would you swap for?" "If you could switch your gender for a day, what would you do?"

In some institutions of higher learning across Africa, a day is set aside for extra-curricular activities premised on gender swaps as a vehicle to enter the world of the opposite gender for enhanced gender relationships. At the Delta State

University 2023 Gender Switch Day, a popular Nigerian blog site, yabaleftonline, observed that it looked like the boys had been waiting for this day all their lives. From South Africa, Sekgota (2023) reports that the observation of Gender Bender Day, also called Spirit Week in an unnamed secondary school, received a morale boost from teachers who joined in the fun of cross-dressing to challenge social norms and give people an idea of what the opposite sex goes through in everyday life. The Asian experience follows similar line as Chan (2019) reported that Gender Swap Day at China's Li Po Chun United World College taught students about empathy, the struggles of the opposite sex, and objectification. She went further to recommend gender swap as a means of challenging social norms about dress codes.

In the current dispensation of the virtual world powered by advanced technology, a new army of social media skit makers pushing the gender identity frontier in Nigeria, now rule popular impressions and economic aspirations on the strength of gender swap. Such practitioners who are mostly youths, see gender swap primarily as a form of employment and a route to instant celebrity (Ben-Iheanacho, Gbenoba & Shaibu, 2023). Beyond popular culture appeal, however, gender swap as a thematic concern has become the subject of serious literary pursuit. In *The Gaze*, Turkish award-winning writer, Elif Shakaf, brings into focus and explores the damage that results from the simple desire to look at others against the narrative template of gender swap. In the novel, an obese woman and her lover, a dwarf, sick of being stared at wherever they go, decide to reverse roles. Consequently, the man goes out wearing make-up while the woman draws a moustache on her face. This swap of genderized traits evokes mythological and bizarre freak-show responses from their Istanbul community.

Studies and critical publications in gender-swapped myths align the endeavours to attempts at perspective shifting wherein heroic female leads and men with maternal instincts are the norm; thus, viewing modern mores (feminist narratives) through the ancient lens (of myths). In such gender-swapped myths, "beastly, huge, grotesque women" are deliberately created to change their genders, roles, and characterization (Wollaston, 2022). Consequently, the creative exercise of gender swapping often results in the subversion of accepted gender roles and patriarchal stereotypes especially such tropes where it is always male characters fighting, rescuing hapless people, and exhibiting toxic masculinity while helpless female characters are wont to be rescued. The application of gender swap to these narrative frames results in the creation of Super-Machowomen who, by the process of swapping become psychopaths, behaving as badly as the men, and unleashing violence as the norm. In their newly edited lives, the emergent swapped female characters do not promise a feminist Utopia; rather, they evidence a flipped world. As Fransman and Plackett (2022) admit, gender swapping disrupts gender constructs and while it does not solve the dominant tensions of the construct, it offers new perspectives and possibilities on these differences.

To reiterate: gender swapping implies a ruffling of feathers, a going against customs and established practices. It aims at making people uncomfortable by upturning social constraints for the purpose of getting people to open themselves to change and engaging with possibilities. The most visible form of gender swap is cross-dressing.

### **3.2. Cross-dressing**

Cross-dressing refers to wearing clothes and ornaments related to the opposite sex in a particular society, thus switching the gender symbol quickly by changing the clothing and replacing the gender identity at the level of the signifier in an attempt to gain public recognition of their cross-dressing images (Hao, 2019). Cross-dressing, therefore, can be said to be a metaphor that serves as a disguise to create identity blurring and gender ambiguity.

Historically in the Western cultural context, cross-dressing has a long association with the evolution of stage drama in Elizabethan England and extending to the reign of King James I during the flourishing of Shakespeare's plays when the royal court banned women from performing on stage as part of commercial acting companies. This social repression of women's identity led to their representation on stage by men who were disguised by clothing and carried off theatrical convictions by shape, voice, inner emotional, and spiritual expression. As Thomas (2017) observed, the dynamics of female representation by men on stage introduced the need for verisimilitude in the analysis of purposive gender swap.

Effectively, culture producers use cross-dressing as a way to enable men and women, especially entertainers, to explore their freedom and self-expression. It is also deployed as a form of surreptitious identity reinforcement especially as it allows the cross-dresser to enter other-gender-prohibited areas. Conversely, identity blurring and gender ambiguity caused by cross-dressing are often accompanied by physiological and psychological costs since principally, living within defined comfort zones does not inspire defending choices; going beyond boundaries and norms pressure us.

From the womb of African traditional performances of which masquerading art is at the apex, most masquerade performing societies utilize cross-dressing as a ritualized convention to reinforce the exclusion of women from cult secrets. Thus, branding cross-dressing as a process of historicizing and validating patriarchy as studies of the isolation of women from masking in many African societies have shown (Onyeneke, 1978: 63; Cole & Aniakor, 1984: 115). Further, in the African narrative template, cross-dressing is often framed as a survival mechanism within the rarefied sanctuary of myths in the service of the transformation of identity to higher, national purposes. Hence, the legend of Princess Oromopotonyun, the first and only female Alaafin of the ancient Oyo Empire is often cast in the mould of an outlier defying patriarchal restrictions on female leadership by deploying cross-dressing as a necessary tool for lineage perpetuation and political survival.

As narrated by Ugobude (2019), Princess Orompoto was thrust into contestation for the throne following the untimely death of her brother and successor to the throne Alaafin, without an heir. Her other brothers being minors, Orompoto sought to succeed her father in order to retain the crown within her family. Because female leadership was perceived as

a cultural anathema at the historical time, the kingmakers sneered and dared the Princess to show physical evidence of being a man as the basic prerequisite for kingship, within a week.

Princess Orompoto started wearing male items of clothing after this meeting and

On the D-day, she mounted the podium and removed her cap to reveal her hair which had been cut low. She also went ahead to show her chest and still, the elders were not impressed. She finally removed her trousers and, according to oral history, the Chiefs not only saw a penis, but they also saw a scrotum drooping with two scrotum eggs in the sack.

At this point, everyone dropped on their chest in prostration and she got enthroned as Alaafin Orompotoniyun. Orompotoniyun came to be popularly known as Ajiun, the Custodian of the Vagina that Kills Evil Plots (Ugobude, 2019).

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that cross-dressing is purposive, the goal determined by prevailing political circumstances and the social prism from which women were perceived and assigned roles. Within traditional African framing, the masquerades and Orompoto were not involved in personal individuality perception expression. Cross-dressing in these instances is not to be seen as projecting outwardly, an internal personal identity preference. As a form of disruption within traditional codes, cross-dressing operates within the tension of peril of discovery, exposure to ridicule, and extermination.

In modern African societies, cross-dressing especially in the entertainment industry, has been linked by cultural historians to the influence of mass media especially television. Nwigwe (2019) argues that the theatrical experience dates back to the colonial times when women in South Eastern Nigeria were prohibited from wearing bifurcated clothing, a result of which saw itinerant performers wearing female clothing for jest. However, entertainment programmes on television turned the image of the local cross-dresser into a celebrity and glam personality though the conservative social judgment of cross-dressing as a morally reprehensible act causing cultural anxiety and shock to masculinity was prevalent.

### **3.3. Androgyny**

As a biological term, androgyny refers to the combination of masculinity and femininity. Thus, to be androgynous is to be partly male and partly female in appearance, and therefore, of indeterminate sex. In a sense it is to be genderless; being perceived as a blurring of lines between the two. In popular culture, the label Tomboy is often tagged to androgynes while clothing preference is one of the most powerful forms of androgynous expressions.

Androgyny feminism achieved popularity in the '70s and the '80s as a model for conceptualizing gender that avoids sex-specific values. As a theory, it is predicated on Bem's hypothesis which predicts that individuals with similar feminine and masculine traits will be better adjusted than sex-typed personalities. Therefore, androgynous individuals are more likely to engage in cross-sexual behaviour than those who maintain traditional roles. Hence, Krishnaraj (1996) frames androgyny as an alternative to gender polarity. As a concept, androgyny offers a means of transcending the duality of gender differences imposed by cultures. If these polarities are reduced, greater individual freedom and a seamless negotiating of traditional sex and gender differences can be achieved, he further posits. Hence, androgyny is conceptualized as the ultimate feminist goal in dealing with deep-seated structural gender inequalities.

Boskey (2023) notes that people of any gender and sexual orientation can be androgynous and take on androgynous presentation through fashion and style hence there is no inherent association between gender identity and androgyny. Martin, Cook and Andrews (2017) observe that androgyny once stigmatized and despised, could become a good thing, being associated with flexibility and better adjustment. However, Woodhill and Samuels (2003) distinguish between positive and negative androgyny. Positive androgyny is characterized by compassion and independence while negative androgyny is characterized by negative masculine and feminine traits such as being temperamental and aggressive.

The aesthetic pursuit of androgyny is an ancient topic especially as "it embodies the desire of humans for the harmonious state of the sexes and the pursuit of the perfection of individual personality." (Hao & Zi, 2019) It encapsulates Freud's (2000: 79) convictions that "For human beings, pure men or pure women cannot be found either in the psychological sense or in the biological sense. On the contrary, everyone shows a mixture of their biological characteristics. Julsonnet's (2013) study of Jung emphasized that people tend to be bisexual in both emotional and psychological aspects; concluding that through thousands of years of living together and communicating with each other, men and women have acquired the characteristics of the opposite sex, which ensures harmony and understanding between the two sexes. While proposing androgyny as a literary theory, Woolf (1928) opined that the concept is vague as there is no absolute distinction between male and female; rather, androgyny pursues a harmonious state between male and female in their pursuit of the perfect state of a personality which, ultimately, shares the characteristics of both sexes.

## **4. Research methodology**

Using qualitative discourse analysis from the feminist standpoint guided by post-structuralist philosophy, this research paper pursues intersections between contemporary gender discourse and popular culture as foregrounded in Olugbile's debut novel, *Sanya*. The research problems interrogated by the article include: identifying the different levels at which gender swapping occurred in the text, establishing the value or otherwise of cross-dressing in the actualization of the feminist framework of the narrative, and examining androgyny as a concept proposal toward the universal harmony of the sexes within the cultural environment of the novel.

## 5. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this paper relies on two prongs – feminism and mythology. The conceptual framing is guided by an application of modern conceptions of sexuality and human identities as elucidated in gender studies, to myths. Myths are often accounts of the origin of societies in which stories have their roots in the belief system of their creators. They are often value-laden and formalize a society's philosophies and desired norms (Echendu & Ogunyemi, 2020). In African literary criticism, however, the application of queer theories to myths is not common. Therefore, the intellectual exercise undertaken in this paper is a novel engagement.

## 6. Exploring gender swap, cross-dressing, and Androgyny in Olugbile's *Sanya*: Findings and discussions

### 6.1. Synopsis of *Sanya*

Olugbile's debut novel, *Sanya*, is a narrative that focuses on the creatively subverted myth of Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning. With its heroic female characters (human and spiritual), weak and effete men requiring the protection of a woman to fend off bullies, raise an army, and lead men to war as a warrior King, *Sanya* explores gender roles. While Sanya is the younger sibling and female, she is characterized as loud-voiced, broad-shouldered, a defender of her sickly senior brother from local villains, a joy-taker in military training, the one who throws a man in a fight and feeds him sand as a triumphant meal a thoroughbred non-conformist to feminine codes. By contrast, Dada, the firstborn and son of the house is a physical wreck; assailed by poor health yet blessed with the creative sensibilities of the artist. Brooding Dada is the emasculated male made resentful by the twist of Fate. The gods are invited into the narrative when dark, malevolent forces come into contestation to wrestle patriarchal powers back from the "female pretender"; a fitting parallel to the invocation of the divine in the binary parallels of light/darkness, power/powerlessness, Eledumare/Esu. To complete the archetypal Armageddon is a cherub of feminized divine beings on standby.

While fleeing Aromire to escape justice for the murder of the village bully clad in her brother's danshiki and kembe and with her bridal shuku chopped into a masculine low cut with a middle ridge tuft, Sanya transverses a magical forest in a form of time swap from which she emerges not only physically transformed, but in time to be profiled as the classic roaming -stranger-defender-of-a-traumatized-and-decimated-kingdom. The outlier warrior rescues the captives and royal damsels in distress, and is crowned King Bade by a grateful people who marry off one of the rescued Princesses to their deliverer so a new lineage and cycle of prosperity can be forged. This is where the first narrative twist occurs as the rescuer-prince is in reality, a woman. To perpetuate the subterfuge and in the quest for more powers, as she leads the Oluji Kingdom to greater heights by annexing new territories and institutionalizing treaties that ensure peace, Sanya journeys to the realm of the Orisas, ferried by Oya, the Yoruba goddess of wind, lightning, rain and storms. Instructively, Oya is also associated with change, transformation, and destruction. In this realm of spiritual truth which Sanya entered wearing a set of female clothing she had purloined from the Queen's box, a transformation of such magnitude that blinded the Orisas by light occurs; the evidence of which is a new set of clothing signifying her new identity and swapped gender:

Then the light dimmed... The clothes she was wearing had disappeared, replaced by a blazing red danshiki and sokoto... Even the large braid running down the centre of her head was tinged with red, as though fire-kissed.

A soothing heat warmed her entire body, not just her stomach and she raised her head, eyes wide with the realization of the power that had been unleashed in her.

The Queen mother's eyes locked with Sanya's. When the Orisa saw a flicker of red light in the warrior's eyes, she smiled in satisfaction.

"Roar!" she thundered.

Sanya opened her mouth and screamed, but her voice was trapped in her throat.

A volcano of blazing fire erupted out of her mouth and engulfed the air above her (Olugbile, 2022:247).

Meanwhile, back in Aromire, Dada is forlorn and desolate following the sudden inexplicable death of his aunt and surrogate mother, Abike. By another twist of fate, he is invited to sit on the throne of his ancestors as King of Banire which he leads in tranquillity and creative ingenuity to prosperity. But he is no warrior and soon seeks the protection of the King of Oluji, famed for his invincibility and for incinerating his enemies in battle. Displaying crass insensitivity, Sanya yields to public adulation, and surreptitiously annexes her brother's kingdom thereby spooking his insecurities and forcing him to align with the dark forces restlessly writhing within him. To exact his vengeance, Dada reveals his sister's best-kept secret and true identity as a skirt-wearing female masquerading as King of Oluji thus actualizing her greatest fear "I wouldn't be king if they knew I was a woman." (Olugbile, 2022: 371)

### 6.2. The Significance of Cross-dressing in *Sanya*

Olugbile uses cross-dressing not merely as a signifier of gender swap, but as a structural indicator of critical character development. Gender swap also serves as a significant index in the plot of the book. As soon as the character, Sanya, erupts into the narrative, the author draws immediate attention to her gender-blurring sartorial defiance:

She was lanky and had broader, sturdier shoulders than her brother.

Her arms had small, firm muscle mounds and her legs, sticking out from her buba and *adire shorts*, seemed to go on forever. *All other women*

*In the village wore wrappers and skirts*. Underneath the loose buba was the only hint of femininity about her, mere nubs where breasts should be.

Her short hair was braided tightly to her skull in cornrows, haphazard ridges that seemed tamed more for convenience than style.” (Olugbile, 2022: 58).

When she emerges from the magical forest and time machine and her fugitive steps lead her to Oluji, she is described as dressed in masculine clothing items of danshiki and Kembe while her head is covered with a fila, a man’s cap. Her physical attributes are that of a *Young Fellow* who moved with the confidence of a tiger on the prowl and whose chiseled jaw framed a face not exactly *Handsome* but made interesting by scars running across it. (Olugbile, 2022: 127). Time has happened to the girl on the run, turning her into a resolute and unflinching figure that enthralled the people of Oluji when ‘he’ immediately swung into action and went after the marauding bandits that had ransacked the kingdom. Trapped in a gender assigned to her on account of her apparel, events spiral fast and Sanya baptizes herself Bade of the Obayan lineage. Soon, ‘he’ is crowned King with Princess Obatooni as Queen while Princess Osuntoke pines and longs for his love.

As noted earlier, when Sanya went to the realm of the Orisas in search of more power, she wore female clothing but returned from the mythical land donning magnificent male apparel. This is the peak of plot action and as events begin to nose dive towards a denouement, her clothing reflects the downward slope. “Absentmindedly, piece by piece, she yanked off the red attire the Orisas had gifted her, leaving the plain buba and Sokoto she wore underneath as she continued walking.” (Olugbile, 2022: 380) When she hanged herself in her male underwear while pregnant with her love child with Osoosi, Sanya is translated into the realm of the supernatural as the warrior king, not as a woman and pregnant female. Motherhood was a treasure she had no use for. Her epitaph would rightly be “Power before love, Power after lust, Power above all”; a final summation that leaves no room for a mothering female.

While clad in manly garments both of war and personal items, a pregnant Sanya seeking reinstatement and rehabilitation by the Orisas, did not negotiate and bargain as a nurturing female and broken woman. For her, motherhood was not a thing to be joyful about; rather, it emasculated her true calling and impeded her military activities. Her dying plea was for the power she had lost. It is the return of the fire the fetus had smothered that she yearns for. Motherhood may be considered a universal treasure by and for women, it was one treasure Sanya did not desire.

The significance of the deployment of cross-dressing as a feminist device within the narrative template of *Sanya* is that it becomes a purveyor to breaking all forms of gender restrictions placed by society on women of the historic framework of the novel, by the female protagonist, Sanya.

### 6.3. Myth, swapped persona and sexuality options

The application of modern queer theory to myth revolves around tales of romantic entanglement and sexual intimacy between supernatural figures of the same sex, or stories that feature divine action in the pantheon of gods and goddesses that result in changes in gender. Consequently, retroactively applying such modern concepts of sexuality to myths ascribes gender fluidity in humans to the action of gods and the consequence of supernatural intervention on human sexuality. Pattanaik (2002) argues that while LGBT themes in mythologies of Western cultural template especially among the gods and goddesses of ancient Greek narratives wherein they exhibit some form of same-sex eroticism abound, queer manifestations in non-Western myths, though socially repressed, squeeze their way into the myths, legends and lore of the land. Hence, they reflect the collective unconscious and archetypal truths at odds with mainstreamed mores. Such myths of homoeroticism appear in the form of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender expressions; all of which reject heteronormative and binary views of gender.

Murray and Roscoe (2001: 99 -100) observe that possession by spirits is an integral element of Yoruba (and other African) spiritism. The possessed (of both genders though more often female) are regarded as the “bride” of the possessing deity while the language used to describe possession is both sexual and violent. However, they emphasize that there is no link between possession and homosexual activity in the everyday life of Yoruba spiritual traditions. This framing is an important indicator of Olugbile’s treatment of the sexuality options of Sanya as a gender-swapped personality within the rubrics of the mythical framing of the narrative.

In *Sanya* Olugbile undertook a feminization of a patriarchal domain that allows for the projection of the Sanya brand. Hence, the male characters are not obsessed with lineage perpetuation but with the pursuit of power for its sake as motivation and personal aggrandizement. Contrary to patriarchal myths of patrimony wherein men go to every length to perpetuate their lineage to evidence their masculinity, the Council of Chiefs of Oluji is so enthralled by their warrior king and her invincibility that they do not pressure the stranger on their throne to bring forth an heir. Equally, the author’s use of the feminine pronoun consistently for her female character even when gender-swapped and operating within the masculine social role, gives insight to Olugbile’s ideological pursuit in the narrative.

The book must be accorded an important place in post-modernist feminist literary discourse as a perspective-shifting debut. It is significant for its thematic melding of myth and gender swapping as a vehicle to explore, question, and tweak accepted and mainstreamed versions of legends and iconic monikers. Albeit as it may, it is important to state that the marriage between the gender-swapped Sanya and Princess Obatooni is very much binary operative and heteronormative. Hence, Olugbile makes much effort to paint a picture of female friendship and sisterhood camaraderie between King Bade and his consort, Queen Obatooni. Their asexual relationship is further accentuated by Obatooni’s covenant of chastity. This frames and excuses the non-consummation of their matrimony from a descent into an LGBT template. Further, an LGBTQ sexual tension between Sanya and Obatooni would have exposed Sanya as a woman, even if a red skirt-wearing war general was accepted as the quirk and peculiar fashion of mystical and mythical proportions.

Given the post-modernist flavour of feminism especially the colouration from strident voices for the inclusion of people with alternative sexuality as instances of lived, diverse experiences that expand the frontiers of feminism while extending understanding of the integral relationship between inclusion and power dynamics, *Sanya* could be interpreted from the prism of the classic/traditional/mainstream strand of feminist analysis. This strand renders gender and sexuality options from the perspective of heterosexuality which it promotes as a norm in its narratives. Olugbile's sexual disposition in the book is in tandem with the conservative Nigerian social disposition which criminalizes same-sex relationships.

It is against this background that Princess Osuntoke's declamation at Sanya's gender reveal must be understood. It was not coming from a place of sexual jealousy; rather, it was from a perspective of beholding an abomination; an abhorrence for the realization of the taboo that "A woman sits on the throne of Oluji." (Olugbile, 2022: 226) Sanya's tragedy stems, not from an inability to provide an heir, but from the cultural convention that the gods forbid that a king should have a womb. Thus, while her gender transformation could be said to have given her unmitigated access to power beyond what was the norm for women of the historical timeframe of the book, it took away her freedom and held her prisoner.

## **7. Implications of study**

### **7.1. A Brave New World of Androgynous Heroines**

In recognition and acknowledgment of the intervention and impact of technology, especially the mass media, on feminist discourse, Olugbile uses the swapping algorithm to exemplify the emergence of an action heroine figure on the Nigerian literary scene. In *Sanya*, Olugbile creates an African action heroine that resonates with contemporary readers and they can relate to it.

The mass media actively propagates popular classic notions of male characters slaying the dragon, saving damsels in distress, and rescuing the world from disaster. Recent, feminism-tinted popular culture mediation has seen to the emergence of a new race of glamour warrior female lead characters in movies and television series ranging from Grace Jones to Angelina Jolie. Much as these androgynous characters challenge female stereotypes, Pickett (2023) noted that female action heroes are never presented as violent as male ones. Olugbile's *Sanya* kicks this convention where it topples inelegantly. As a myth mutation, she enjoys war for the thrill it gives her and for the dread her name conjures among her enemies.

Further, *Sanya* is a badly behaved warrior king driven to destruction by her obsession with power; just as men. Her character portrayal illustrates the feminist slogan that power is gender neutral and every holder of power redefines its nature. Therefore, as a super macho woman who emerges from a gender swap, *Sanya* is rash, reckless, and often does not choose her battles with wisdom; leading to the massacre of her army in an avoidable war and mutiny in her camp. Like Sango, her imperious mold, she was big, strong, aggressive, and ultimately, overreaching.

Androgyny opens a new chapter in gender harmony. While mainstream feminism initiates the enquiry: "Who says salvation lies only at the hands of men? Must all warriors be men?", androgyny opens the door to a brave new world. This is encapsulated in Oya's summation as she mused the peculiar destiny that was *Sanya*'s: "What does it matter?" she scoffed. "If a man sees a snake and a woman kills it, is the important thing not that the snake did not escape?" (Olugbile, 2022: 377) It is fitting, therefore, that 'herstory' and history remember *Sanya* for her acts of bravery and strength in the birthing of fire; and not whether she was a woman or a man (Olugbile, 2022: 392)'.

### **7.2. Of repressed social narratives and mythic rendering**

Another major implication of the study revealed by this paper is that repressed social narratives excluded from mainstreamed templates and accepted mythic renderings have a way of sneaking out of containment, demanding attention as alternative and subversive themes. Hence, the possibility that many African myths carry within themselves, hidden indicators of the 'forbidden' roles of women in leadership positions. Therefore, this paper calls for more research and critical attention to folkloric expressions such as heroic chants, songs, and tales, etc, through which forbidden and uncomfortable truths seep into accepted performance and narrative templates.

## **8. Recommendations and suggestions**

The paper recommends a more creative exploration of the myths and legends associated with African heroes and heroines in a contemporary nuance. It suggests that such a contemporary rendition would engender the continuing relevance of these legends to a new generation. Further, it advocates that creative endeavours must be packaged in forms that appeal to and resonate with the entertainment and enlightenment realities of the target audience. The paper, therefore, calls for readable, relatable narratives of African Superheroes that recreate historical and cultural fidelity of relational value to a new generation. It is suggested that these measures would not only avail the readers of more genres to choose from but, ultimately, revitalize the reading culture in Nigerian communities.

## **9. Conclusion**

Our qualitative discourse evaluation of Olugbile's *Sanya* has identified gender swapping as a narrative device that propelled the actions of the book forward. We identified the many instances where, using cross-dressing as evidence of gender swap, the female protagonist accessed spaces otherwise exclusive to the masculine gender at the historical dispensation of the setting. Therefore, cross-dressing not only aided the actualization of the feminist framework of the narrative, it expanded the continuing relevance of the legend of Sango by creating the myth of *Sanya*. The purpose of the

new myth is to give the emergent action heroine a now-generation resonance and contemporary relevance. Further, the creative deployment of cross-dressing upon ancient myth helped birth a new feminist pop protagonist, which itself is indicative of the impact of technology on post-modernist feminism. Hence, our study has highlighted the resourcefulness and creative ingenuity of the author.

Further, our analysis identified androgyny as a putative resolution of the tensions in the binary sexual template leading to the eventual collapse of patriarchy. However, we also noted that this could well be an intellectual exercise in fantasy as androgynes are no better behaved than their gender opposites. We, therefore, conclude that Olugbile's *Sanya* has widened the landscape for feminist literary discourse in African Literature.

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