

**THE ROLE OF HEROISM AS A SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN WOLE SOYINKA'S
DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN AND OLA ROTIMI'S KURUNMI.**

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CERTIFICATION

I certify that this study was carried out by NWOKEDI PERPETUAL (Miss) in the department of English and Literature, University of Benin, under my supervision.

Prof. (Mrs.) S.I. Akhuemokhan
(Project Supervisor)

Date

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the Almighty God. Also to my Parents Mr and Mrs Nwokedi, my siblings Nwokedi Lucia, nwokedi Micheal, Nwokedi Stephen, mentors and friends.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER TWO: THE ROLE OF HEROISM AS A SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN SOYINKA'S *DEATH* AND THE *KINGS HORSEMAN* AND ROTIMI'S *KURUNMI*

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ABSTRACT

This project looks at how heroism is shown as a social responsibility in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*.

In Soyinka's play, the horseman is expected to carry out a duty that will keep the community's tradition alive, but his failure shows how ignoring responsibility can bring disorder to society.

In Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, the leader stands firmly by tradition, but his pride and strictness raise questions about whether his actions truly serve the people. By comparing both plays, the study shows that heroism is not just about bravery but also about serving the community and protecting its values. The project also portrays that in African drama, true heroism is tied to the well-being of society and the choices individuals make for the common good.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to look at how heroism is presented as a social responsibility in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. The study aims to show how these playwrights use their characters to explain the link between bravery, duty, and the survival of the community. It will also examine how personal choices of leaders can affect society either positively or negatively.

1.2 Scope of the Study

This project focuses on the two plays: *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Kurunmi*. It will look at the main characters-Elesin and Kurunmi-and how they represent heroism and responsibility in their different cultural settings. The study does not cover all of Soyinka's or Rotimi's works, but only these plays where the issue of heroism and social duty is strongly presented.

1.3 Methodology

The method used in this study is mainly textual analysis. The plays will be read carefully and interpreted to bring out the themes of heroism and responsibility. Supplementary materials, including scholarly articles, books, and online resources will be consulted to provide additional insights and contextualization. These secondary sources will be obtained from academic databases, literary journals, and reputable online platforms, in order to give wider understanding.

1.4 Theoretical Background

This study is guided mainly by Postcolonial Theory, a literary approach that looks at how African writers respond to colonial history, cultural conflicts, and the struggles of identity in postcolonial societies. Postcolonial criticism helps us understand how literature can protect African traditions and also question harmful practices within those traditions.

In the case of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the theory helps us see how the play is more than a story about death. It is about the clash between traditional Yoruba culture and colonial interference. The colonial officers misunderstand the meaning of Elesin's duty and see it as a barbaric act, but Soyinka uses the play to show that it is a deep cultural responsibility tied to the survival of the community. Through postcolonial theory, we can see how Soyinka defends African cultural values against Western judgment.

For Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, postcolonial theory also applies because the play is set in a period of colonial influence but focuses more on leadership and tradition within an African context. *Kurunmi* is portrayed as a hero who strongly resists change and holds tightly to Yoruba custom. However, his rigid attitude leads to conflict and destruction. Here, the theory allows us to see how Rotimi presents the tension between tradition and modernity, showing that African societies must balance both if they are to survive.

By using postcolonial criticism, this study will explore how both playwrights redefine heroism in their works. Heroism is not just personal bravery but a responsibility that is tied to the well-being of the whole community. The theory also helps to explain how African writers use drama as a tool to teach lessons about culture, leadership, and responsibility in a society affected by colonialism and change.

1.5 Review of Related Scholarship

Many scholars have studied Soyinka and Rotimi, especially in the areas of culture, tradition, leadership, and responsibility.

On *Death and the King's Horseman*, several critics have noted that the play is not simply about a ritual suicide, but about the responsibility of an individual to his society. Elesin's failure to carry out his duty has been interpreted by scholars as a symbol of how personal weakness can destroy communal harmony. Critics such as Abiola Irele have argued that Soyinka uses the play to highlight the importance of social duty and the dangers of neglecting cultural values.

Other scholars have also discussed how colonial misunderstanding in the play represents the clash between African and Western worldviews.

On *Kurunmi*, many scholars focus on the character of Kurunmi as a symbol of resistance and authority. Some writers argue that Kurunmi is a hero because he defends tradition and refuses to compromise with foreign influence. However, other critics see him as a tragic figure whose stubbornness and pride bring destruction to his people. This double view shows that heroism in Rotimi's play is complex, it is not just about being brave but also about knowing when leadership should serve the common good.

Comparative studies of Soyinka and Rotimi are not as common, but some scholars agree that both playwrights present African leaders in positions where their personal decisions carry heavy consequences for society. While Soyinka focuses on the failure of responsibility in the face of colonial presence, Rotimi explores the danger of holding on too tightly to tradition without considering change.

This study directly compare both plays through the theme of heroism as social responsibility. Most of the works reviewed deal with each play separately, but this project brings them together to show how African drama teaches that true heroism is not measured by pride or ritual alone, but by the ability to act in ways that protect and sustain the community.

1.6 Justification of the Study

This study is important because it brings a new understanding of heroism, not just as bravery but as a duty to the society. By comparing the two plays, it shows that African literature teaches lessons about leadership, sacrifice, and responsibility. The study also adds to existing knowledge by filling the gap where both plays are rarely studied together.

1.7 Thesis Statement

This study argues that in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, heroism is presented not as individual bravery but as a social responsibility tied to the survival and harmony of the community. The plays show that when leaders and heroes neglect their duty, whether through weakness, pride, or rigid attachment to tradition, the entire society suffers.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ROLE OF HEROISM AS A SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN SOYINKA'S DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN AND ROTIMI'S KURUNMI

2.1 Introduction

In African literature, heroism is often more than individual bravery; it is linked to the survival, unity, and values of the community. Unlike Western traditions where heroes are celebrated for personal victories, African drama shows that a hero must carry the weight of communal duty. This chapter discusses how Soyinka and Rotimi present heroism in their plays as a form of social responsibility. While both plays deal with themes of duty, tradition, and sacrifice, they present different angles on how heroes succeed or fail in their obligations to society.

2.2 Heroism in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is a play that deals deeply with the meaning of heroism in Yoruba society. Unlike the Western idea of the hero as someone who wins battles or shows physical strength, Soyinka presents heroism as an act of sacrifice and responsibility to the community. The main character, Elesin Oba, is the king's horseman who has the sacred duty to follow the king into the afterlife. In Yoruba belief, this is not a small matter—it is a duty that connects the living, the dead, and the unborn. For Elesin, carrying out this duty is the true test of heroism.

At first, Elesin is presented as confident and willing to fulfill his role. He even speaks with pride about his duty and his readiness to die with honor. The people around him also treat him with respect because they know the weight of his responsibility. However, as the play unfolds, Soyinka shows that heroism is not just about talking bravely; it requires discipline and the ability to put the community above personal desires. Elesin begins to delay his sacrifice

because he wishes to enjoy life one last time, including marrying a young bride on the very night he is meant to die. This moment of weakness becomes the turning point of the play.

Soyinka uses Elesin's failure to show that a hero is not judged only by his courage but by his ability to complete the responsibility given to him. When Elesin delays, the British colonial officer, Pilkings, steps in to stop the ritual because he sees it as barbaric. The interference is possible only because Elesin himself was not fully committed. His failure to act quickly and decisively allows outsiders to disrupt the sacred duty. In the end, Elesin's son, Olunde, takes up the responsibility and sacrifices himself to restore balance, proving himself to be the true hero of the play.

This shift from Elesin to Olunde carries an important message about heroism. Soyinka suggests that heroism is not about age, status, or words—it is about action and responsibility. Elesin, though older and experienced, fails because of weakness and indulgence. Olunde, young but disciplined, succeeds because he understands that true heroism lies in sacrifice for the good of the community.

Heroism is all portrayed in the link between the individual and the community. Elesin's duty is not his alone; it is tied to the spiritual and cultural survival of his people. When he fails, it is not just his personal failure, but it brings shame, disorder, and cosmic imbalance to the entire community. This shows that in Yoruba society, a hero's life is never private. The actions of a hero are always tied to the destiny of others. Heroism is therefore a social responsibility, not an individual achievement.

The colonial presence in the play also deepens the meaning of heroism. While the British see Elesin's duty as suicide, Soyinka presents it as an act of courage and cultural survival. The

clash highlights the difference between African and Western ideas of heroism. For the Yoruba people, dying for the sake of tradition and balance is an honorable act. For the British, it is senseless. Soyinka's presentation shows that African heroism must be understood within its cultural context. Through this, Soyinka shows that true heroism cannot exist without discipline and responsibility. The play makes it clear that heroism is not measured by what an individual desires but by what the community needs for survival.

2.3 Heroism in Rotimi's *Kurunmi*

Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* tells the story of a Yoruba warrior and leader who strongly resists the new tradition that allows the king's son to inherit the throne. Kurunmi, the leader of Ijaiye, stands firmly against a new succession law introduced in Yorubaland. According to Yoruba tradition, a king's son was not supposed to inherit the throne directly after his father's death. However, a new practice was beginning to emerge, where the son of the late king could succeed him. Kurunmi, a strict defender of tradition, saw this change as a betrayal of Yoruba custom and was ready to go to war to resist it. To his people, Kurunmi is a hero because he is bold, courageous, and always ready to stand for tradition. Although from the beginning, Rotimi presents Kurunmi as a hero of resistance. He is bold, fearless, and uncompromising. His speeches are full of passion, and he inspires his followers to stand with him against what he calls a violation of their heritage. However, Rotimi complicates this image of heroism by showing the dangers of pride and rigidity. Kurunmi refuses to listen to advice, warnings, or even the cries of his people who fear the consequences of war. He sees compromise as weakness and believes that tradition must be defended at all costs. This stubbornness, though born out of courage, eventually leads to tragedy. The war ends in defeat, and Kurunmi's

people pay the price for his inflexible leadership. His adamant form of heroism brings more destruction than protection. Rotimi uses Kurunmi's downfall to teach that heroism is not just about bravery or loyalty to tradition; it must also involve wisdom, flexibility, and care for the well-being of the community. A true hero is not one who forces his own prideful vision on others but one who balances courage with wisdom. Kurunmi fails this test, and his fall becomes a lesson in the dangers of heroism that is blinded by arrogance.

In his own understanding, he is defending the honor of his people and the purity of Yoruba tradition. This makes him admirable in many ways because he sees his life as tied to the destiny of his community. Yet, the tragedy is that his interpretation of heroism does not allow him to adapt to new realities. His refusal to bend or compromise shows the limits of heroism when it is not guided by wisdom. In this way, Kurunmi represents the kind of hero who defends the dignity and values of his people, even when facing great odds. Rotimi also contrasts Kurunmi's heroism with the responses of others in the play. While Kurunmi insists on war, some characters prefer dialogue and negotiation. This contrast highlights the different ways heroism can be interpreted, through bold defiance or through careful diplomacy. By making Kurunmi's approach destructive, Rotimi suggests that heroism must be measured by its results. A leader who leads his people into unnecessary suffering cannot be remembered as a successful hero, no matter how brave he was.

In terms of dramatic style, Rotimi presents Kurunmi as a larger-than-life figure. His speeches are fiery, his presence commanding, and his words inspiring. This makes him a charismatic hero, one who can rally people around him. But Rotimi uses this charisma to also show how

dangerous it can be when a leader has the power to move people but lacks the wisdom to guide them toward peace. His courage and leadership qualities cannot be denied. He is a warrior who believes that dying in defense of tradition is far better than living in dishonor. However, Rotimi also presents another side of Kurunmi. His strictness and refusal to accept change which led to destruction. His decision to fight leads to the death of many warriors and suffering for his people. This shows that heroism, when it is based only on pride or arrogance, can harm society instead of helping it. Kurunmi's tragedy is that his sense of duty is mixed with stubbornness, making him fail to see when tradition needs to be adjusted for the good of the community.

Through Kurunmi, Rotimi teaches that heroism must go hand in hand with wisdom. A true hero is not only brave but also responsible enough to know when to fight and when to adapt.

2.4 Comparison of the Two Plays

Both plays present heroism as a form of responsibility to society, but the approach is different. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka presents Elesin as a man chosen by tradition to carry out a sacred duty. His heroism is not in war or physical strength but in sacrifice. He is expected to follow the king into the afterlife to maintain cosmic order and social balance. The challenge of his heroism lies in self-control and obedience to tradition. However, Elesin fails because of his weakness and attachment to pleasure. His delay opens the door for colonial interference, and as a result, his community faces shame and disruption. Here, Soyinka shows that a hero fails not only himself but also his people when he cannot fulfill his responsibility.

On the other hand, Kurunmi presents heroism in a different form. Kurunmi is a warrior and political leader whose strength lies in resistance and defense of tradition. Unlike Elesin, his

challenge is not weakness but pride. He boldly refuses to accept a change in the succession tradition, even when such change could save his people from war. Kurunmi's courage inspires his followers, but his stubbornness brings destruction upon them. Rotimi therefore shows that while bravery is a part of heroism, it must be guided by wisdom and flexibility. A hero who refuses to adapt to changing realities may end up destroying the very society he seeks to protect. The similarity between the two plays is that both heroes fail in their duties, but for opposite reasons. Elesin fails because he is too weak to carry out his duty; Kurunmi fails because he is too rigid to compromise. Elesin's tragedy comes from indulgence and delay, while Kurunmi's comes from arrogance and pride. Yet both failures affect their communities in painful ways, reminding us that a hero's actions are never personal—they always carry social consequences. Another point of comparison is the role of tradition. In both plays, tradition is central to the idea of heroism. Elesin's duty is tied to Yoruba cosmology, where the death of the king must be balanced by the sacrifice of the horseman. Kurunmi's stand is tied to Yoruba political tradition, where a son should not succeed his father as king. While Elesin's failure shows the danger of neglecting tradition, Kurunmi's failure shows the danger of holding on to tradition without wisdom. Together, the plays suggest that tradition is important in African society, but it must be balanced with responsibility, discipline, and foresight.

The colonial factor also sets the plays apart. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, British colonial officials interfere directly in a cultural practice they do not understand, worsening Elesin's failure. This shows the clash between Western colonial values and African tradition. In *Kurunmi*, however, the conflict is internal, within Yoruba society itself. There is no

colonial interference, but rather a clash of values between progress and tradition. This difference shows how African drama addresses both external and internal challenges to society.

Together, these plays show that African drama presents heroism as a balance between courage, duty, and responsibility. A hero must not only be brave but must also act in ways that secure the future of the community. Heroism is therefore not selfish but collective; it is judged by its effect on the society, not just on the individual.

2.5 The Social Responsibility of Heroism

In both plays, the idea of social responsibility is clear. Elesin is responsible for guiding his king's spirit and keeping the balance of the community, while Kurunmi is responsible for protecting tradition and leading his people. Both men face moments where their personal desires and decisions affect the fate of their people.

From Soyinka, we learn that neglect of duty is dangerous. From Rotimi, we learn that excessive pride and rigidity can also be destructive. The two playwrights remind us that true heroism in African society means making sacrifices, carrying the burden of leadership, and ensuring that society's survival is placed above personal interest. In African drama, the hero is tested not by what he gains for himself, but by how much he gives to secure the life, culture, and values of his people.

CHAPTER THREE

HEROISM AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY A CRITICAL DISCUSSION

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses further how heroism works as a social responsibility in the two plays, drawing lessons from their characters and situations. It also interprets the larger meaning of the playwrights' message about leadership, tradition, and community life. The chapter will highlight the role of duty, sacrifice, and the balance between personal desires and collective needs.

3.2 The Burden of Duty in African Society

In traditional African societies, individuals are not seen as separate from the community. Every person has a role that contributes to the survival of the group. The survival, peace, and progress of the community often depend on the willingness of individuals to carry out responsibilities assigned to them by tradition, culture, or social position. This sense of duty is what defines a hero in many African literary works. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, the burden of duty is tied to Elesin's role as the king's horseman. According to Yoruba custom, when the king dies, the horseman must follow him into the afterlife through ritual death. This is not seen as suicide, but as a sacred duty that ensures cosmic balance between the living and the ancestors. The entire community looks to Elesin to fulfill this responsibility, and his honor, as well as the honor of his people, depends on it. Yet the weight of this duty becomes too much for Elesin. His desire for earthly pleasures, such as marrying a young bride on the eve of his death, delays him and weakens his resolve. The burden of duty here is shown not only

as a cultural expectation but as a personal struggle between human desires and communal responsibility. Elesin's failure reveals how difficult it can be to bear the weight of duty, especially when it demands total sacrifice. Olunde, Elesin's son, provides a contrast. Having studied in England, he understands both the Western perspective and the Yoruba tradition. When his father fails, Olunde steps forward and accepts the duty to die in his father's place. For him, the burden of duty is not negotiable because it transcends personal desires, it is about preserving the dignity of the community. His action shows that true heroism in African society is measured by the willingness to carry the heaviest burdens for the sake of others.

In Kurunmi, the same idea of duty appears but in a different way. It appears in a political and military form. As the leader of Ijaiye, Kurunmi carries the responsibility of protecting his people and defending their traditions. When the new system of succession threatens the old order, Kurunmi sees it as his duty to resist the change, even if it means going to war. This sense of duty is admirable at first, because it shows loyalty to ancestral customs and courage in the face of new challenges. But the burden soon becomes destructive. Kurunmi refuses to listen to counsel or consider compromise. His rigid sense of duty leads him into war with neighboring Ibadan, a war that causes great suffering for his people. Unlike Olunde, who shoulders the burden of duty with humility and sacrifice, Kurunmi allows the burden to become prideful and self-serving. The tragedy of his leadership is that he confuses duty to tradition with duty to the community, forgetting that the first responsibility of a leader is to protect the people's well-being. On one hand, it is a source of honor, dignity, and cultural survival. On the other, it can become a source of tragedy if it is carried with weakness, pride, or selfishness. Elesin collapses under the weight of his responsibility, while Kurunmi carries

his duty too rigidly, crushing his people in the process. Through these characters, Soyinka and Rotimi show that the burden of duty is not only about obedience to tradition but also about wisdom, balance, and sacrifice. In African society, the failure of one person is not private, it affects everyone. Elesin's failure is not just his own downfall but a tragedy for the entire Yoruba community, which loses spiritual balance. Similarly, Kurunmi's choices bring suffering not just to himself but to his entire kingdom. This reflects the African worldview where duty is tied to interconnectedness, and the hero's burden is carried on behalf of the whole community. The burden of duty in African society is portrayed as both sacred and demanding. It requires courage, selflessness, and wisdom to carry it successfully. Soyinka's Elesin and Rotimi's Kurunmi demonstrate the dangers of failing to bear this burden properly, one through weakness and delay, the other through pride and rigidity. Yet, through Olunde's sacrifice and the lessons drawn from Kurunmi's fall, both plays affirm that true heroism is found in the willingness to accept the heavy burden of duty, not for personal gain, but for the survival and honor of the community. The plays therefore suggest that while duty is important, it must be guided by wisdom, or else it can lead to destruction.

3.3 The Conflict between Individual and Community

A strong theme in both plays is the tension between personal desires and the demands of the community. In traditional African societies, the individual is not seen as a separate unit but as part of a larger whole, the family, the clan, and the community. Every action taken by an individual has consequences that go beyond personal life. Both *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Kurunmi* explore this conflict in different but related ways, showing how personal choices and attitudes can either support or endanger the survival of the community.

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Elesin's duty to die with the king is not a personal decision but a communal and spiritual obligation. The Yoruba belief system requires that he follow the king into the afterlife to maintain cosmic balance. Elesin is expected to put aside his own desires for the sake of the community. However, the conflict arises when his personal desires—his love of pleasure, music, and even the wish to marry a new bride—interfere with his duty. This delay creates a clash between his individual interests and the community's expectation of sacrifice. In the end, his weakness brings shame to his people and disrupts the harmony between the living and the dead. Through this, Soyinka shows that when an individual places personal desires above collective responsibility, the entire community suffers. Kurunmi, on the other hand, does not struggle with pleasure but with pride. His personal sense of authority blinds him to the needs of his people. Kurunmi sees himself as the defender of Yoruba tradition, and his personal interpretation of tradition becomes the basis for the war. While he believes he is fighting for his people, his rigid insistence on his own vision creates suffering for the same community he claims to protect. Many of his people would have preferred compromise to avoid war, but Kurunmi refuses to bend. This creates a conflict between his personal pride and the true welfare of the community. His downfall shows that a leader who puts his own ego above the well-being of his people, even under the cover of defending tradition, fails to fulfill the true essence of heroism. His unwillingness to bend or consider other opinions makes him act in ways that bring destruction. When comparing both plays, it becomes clear that the conflict between individual and community is presented from two different angles. In Soyinka's play, the conflict comes from weakness and indulgence, the individual fails because he cannot rise above personal desire. In Rotimi's play, the conflict

comes from pride and rigidity, the individual fails because he forces his will on the community without listening to others. The community suffers when the balance between individual and collective responsibility is broken. These conflicts also reveal a deeper message about leadership in African society. The plays suggest that leadership is not a privilege for personal gain but a responsibility to serve the community. Elesin and Kurunmi, though powerful figures, both forget this balance. Elesin forgets because he is distracted by his own pleasures, and Kurunmi forgets because he is blinded by his own pride. Their stories remind us that true leaders must always put the needs of the people before themselves. Another important aspect of this conflict is the role of tradition. In both plays, tradition represents the will of the community, while personal desires or pride represent the will of the individual. Elesin's failure to uphold tradition brings shame and imbalance, while Kurunmi's rigid defense of tradition brings war and destruction. This shows that tradition, while important, must be handled wisely. A hero must respect tradition but also balance it with the realities of the community's survival. Both plays highlight the dangers of selfishness, pride, or weakness when placed above the well-being of the community. In both cases, we see how personal decisions, when placed above community welfare, can turn a hero into a failure.

3.4 Tradition, Change, and Heroism

Another important lesson from both plays is the role of tradition. In Soyinka's play, tradition is sacred and cannot be broken without serious consequences. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, tradition is represented by the ritual duty of the horseman. According to Yoruba belief, when the king dies, the king's horseman must follow him into the afterlife to ensure cosmic balance. This tradition is centuries old, deeply sacred, and central to the spiritual

survival of the people. Elesin's role as a hero is defined by this tradition. However, change enters the scene through colonial interference. The British colonial officer, Pilkings, does not understand the ritual and sees it only as a barbaric act of suicide. He therefore intervenes to stop it, believing he is saving Elesin's life. This clash between Yoruba tradition and Western change creates conflict. Yet Soyinka shows that the deeper problem is Elesin's failure, his delay, indulgence, and weakness give room for change to disrupt tradition. When Elesin fails, his son Olunde rises to the challenge by accepting death and preserving the community's dignity. Elesin's duty is a ritual tradition that connects the world of the living and the dead. By failing to carry it out, he weakens the cultural foundation of his people.

In Rotimi's play, tradition is also powerful but more contested. The issue is not foreign interference but internal change within Yoruba society itself. A new succession system allows the king's son to inherit the throne directly, a practice that contradicts the old custom. Kurunmi, refuses to accept this change. For him, defending tradition is the highest form of heroism, even if it means going to war. His courage and commitment to tradition make him admirable at first, but Rotimi also shows the dangers of absolute rigidity. Kurunmi's refusal to adapt leads to war, suffering, and eventual defeat. Unlike Elesin, who fails because of weakness, Kurunmi fails because of pride and stubbornness. In both cases, the heroes' inability to balance tradition and change brings destruction to their communities. Kurunmi insists that tradition must never change, yet the society around him is already moving in a new direction. His resistance shows that tradition, if held without flexibility, can lead to unnecessary conflict. The plays also highlight the communal dimension of this struggle. Tradition belongs to the community, not to the individual. In *Death and the King's Horseman*,

Elesin's duty is not for himself but for the balance of the entire society. His failure therefore becomes a collective tragedy. In *Kurunmi*, the community suffers for the decisions of their leader, who insists on tradition without considering the cost to his people. This shows that true heroism is not about defending tradition blindly but about protecting the community's survival while respecting its heritage. The plays also show tradition and change as inevitable forces that must be negotiated. Soyinka does not reject change, but he criticizes colonial arrogance that dismisses African traditions without understanding them. Rotimi does not reject tradition either, but he criticizes leaders who hold on to it rigidly even when it destroys their people. Both playwrights are therefore making the same argument: tradition is valuable, but it must engage with change wisely. Heroism lies in finding the right balance between the two. So therefore tradition, change, and heroism are inseparable in these two plays. Elesin and *Kurunmi* are both given the opportunity to embody heroism by guiding their people through the tension between tradition and change. Yet both fail, Elesin through weakness, and *Kurunmi* through pride. Their failures teach that true heroism in African drama is not found in clinging to tradition alone or surrendering blindly to change, but in balancing both for the good of the community. Through this, Rotimi presents heroism as not only protecting tradition but also knowing when to adapt it for the survival of the people.

3.5 Leadership and Social Responsibility

Both plays place heavy responsibility on leaders. Leadership and social responsibility are closely linked in African drama, especially in the works of Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi. In many African societies, a leader is not seen merely as an individual with authority, but as someone who carries the collective destiny of the people. His choices affect not just himself,

but the entire community. Heroism, therefore, is tied to leadership and social responsibility, because a true hero is one who uses his position or influence to protect the welfare of his people. Both *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Kurunmi* reflect this relationship, though in very different ways.

Elesin, though not a king, holds a symbolic leadership position because his action determines the future of the community. Elesin is not a political leader in the ordinary sense, but he holds a sacred position of leadership. His responsibility is spiritual, to accompany the dead king into the afterlife and ensure cosmic balance. This responsibility is not negotiable, because failure would bring shame and disaster to the community. Elesin, however, fails in his role as a leader because he allows personal desires to outweigh his duty. His weakness and delay lead to colonial interference and disrupt the spiritual balance of his society. Here, Soyinka shows that leadership is not about title or power, but about sacrifice. A true leader must place the needs of the community above his own. When Elesin fails, his son Olunde steps in and fulfills the duty, proving that leadership is also about courage and the willingness to give one's life for others. On the other hand, Kurunmi is a political and military leader whose decisions directly affect his people. Kurunmi is the ruler of Ijaiye and a powerful general. His sense of social responsibility is tied to the defense of tradition and the protection of his people's independence. He believes that to accept the new system of kingship succession is to betray his ancestors. Unlike Elesin, Kurunmi is not weak, he is strong, determined, and bold. His failure as a leader comes from rigidity. He refuses to adapt or negotiate, even when it is clear that war will bring heavy suffering to his people. His idea of heroism as leadership is based on absolute loyalty to tradition, but it blinds him to the responsibility of preserving his

community's future. In the end, his people pay the price for his choices.

The two plays highlight that leadership in African society is not about power or pride, but about service and sacrifice. The plays also suggest that leadership is not just about power, but about service. A leader is a servant of tradition, of culture, and most importantly, of the people. Elesin was meant to serve the spiritual needs of the people, while Kurunmi was meant to protect the material and political needs of his community. Both failed because they misunderstood the balance between authority and service. True leadership requires humility, wisdom, and the courage to sacrifice personal ambition for the greater good. the plays highlight that leadership is tested most during times of change. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, colonial influence represents a new force challenging traditional leadership. Elesin could have responded with firmness and discipline, but he did not. In *Kurunmi*, modernization and a shift in kingship succession tested the old order. Kurunmi could have adapted wisely, but he chose rigidity. Both plays show that leadership is not only about defending the past, but also about guiding the people safely into the future. Heroism, therefore, requires the ability to carry tradition forward while still protecting the community from unnecessary destruction. Elesin fails because he allows his own desires to come first. Kurunmi fails because he places his own pride above the welfare of his people. Both plays, therefore, warn that when leaders forget that their first duty is to the people, society suffers.

3.6 Lessons on Heroism from Both Plays

From *Death and the King's Horseman*, we learn that a hero is one who can discipline himself to carry out his duty no matter the cost. From *Kurunmi*, we learn that a hero must be both brave and wise, willing to adapt when necessary for the good of the people.

Together, these plays show that African literature teaches heroism not as personal glory but as responsibility, sacrifice, and service to society. The true hero is not measured by how loudly he fights or how much he gains, but by how much his actions preserve the life, culture, and future of his people. Soyinka and Rotimi use drama to show the link between heroism and social responsibility.

Elesin's weakness and Kurunmi's stubbornness demonstrate two different ways a hero can fail his society. Yet both plays also portrays that for a community to survive, its heroes and leaders must act with wisdom, discipline, and sacrifice.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the role of heroism as a social responsibility in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. From the analysis, it is clear that both playwrights use their works to question and redefine the idea of heroism in African society. Unlike Western traditions that often present the hero as an individual who stands out through personal achievements, African drama, as shown in these plays, presents the hero as someone whose actions are tied to the welfare and survival of the community.

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Elesin is presented with a sacred duty that requires personal sacrifice. His heroism lies in his willingness to follow the king into the afterlife, thus ensuring cosmic balance in Yoruba belief. However, Soyinka shows how weakness and personal desire can make a hero fail in his duty. Elesin's delay and distraction allow colonial interference, and this brings shame and disorder not only to him but to the entire community. The lesson here is that heroism requires discipline, self-control, and loyalty to tradition. When a hero neglects these, the community suffers.

In contrast, Rotimi's *Kurunmi* presents heroism in the form of resistance and defense of tradition. Kurunmi is a warrior and leader who boldly refuses to accept the idea of a son succeeding his father as king. His bravery and strong attachment to custom make him a hero in the eyes of many, but his pride and refusal to adapt also bring destruction. His people pay a heavy price for his rigidity, showing that courage without wisdom can be harmful. Rotimi's play therefore teaches that heroism must go beyond bravery and tradition; it must also consider the well-being and future of the people.

Both plays, when studied together, reveal two different failures of heroism: failure through weakness (Elesin) and failure through pride (Kurunmi). Yet the central message is the same: true heroism in African drama is collective. It is not about the hero's personal glory but about the hero's responsibility to his people. A leader or hero who neglects this responsibility fails, no matter how brave or powerful he may appear.

This research also shows that tradition is an important part of heroism in African literature. In Soyinka's play, tradition is sacred and must be respected to maintain cosmic order. In Rotimi's play, tradition is equally important, but it is challenged by new realities. Both playwrights make it clear that tradition cannot be ignored, but they also show that leaders must apply wisdom when defending tradition. Blindly rejecting change or holding on to pride can harm society just as much as neglecting tradition.

African playwrights use drama not only to entertain but also to teach moral, cultural, and political lessons. Through the failures of Elesin and Kurunmi, Soyinka and Rotimi remind their audiences that leadership and heroism come with a heavy burden of responsibility. A leader must be disciplined, wise, and ready to sacrifice for the greater good. Heroism is therefore a social contract—an agreement where the individual's life and actions are tied to the destiny of the community.

Finally, the plays show that African societies value heroes not for what they gain for themselves but for what they give to others. Elesin's shame comes because he could not give his life when it was needed. Kurunmi's downfall comes because he could not give up his pride for the peace of his people. These lessons remain relevant today, as African nations continue to face questions of leadership, responsibility, and cultural survival.

In conclusion, this study has shown that Soyinka and Rotimi use their plays to redefine heroism as responsibility, sacrifice, and service to society. True heroes are not those who live for themselves, but those who act in ways that preserve the values, unity, and future of their people. Both plays stand as reminders that without responsible and selfless heroes, communities cannot survive

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