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**Full Length Paper**

# The Playwright As a Purveyor of History: Interrogating the Works Of Ola Rotimi

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## Abstract

This study examines the role of the playwright as a custodian and interpreter of history through an interrogation of selected works by Ola Rotimi. Focusing on *Kurunmi* (1971), *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974), and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1985), the research explores how Rotimi reconstructs Nigerian historical experiences through drama to preserve collective memory, critique socio-political realities, and promote national consciousness. Drawing on historiographic criticism and postcolonial theory, the study argues that Rotimi functions not merely as a dramatist but as a theatrical historian who transforms archival events into emotionally resonant narratives. Through qualitative textual analysis and engagement with existing scholarship, the research reveals that Rotimi blends historical facts with creative imagination to interrogate themes such as leadership, resistance, colonialism, tradition, marginalisation, and collective liberation. The study further demonstrates that his dramaturgy challenges Eurocentric representations of African history while foregrounding indigenous perspectives and communal experiences. Findings show that Rotimi's plays serve both pedagogical and ideological purposes by democratising history and making it accessible to broader audiences through performance and storytelling. Ultimately, the research concludes that Rotimi's historical dramas are significant contributions to African literary historiography, as they preserve cultural identity, stimulate critical reflection on nationhood, and position theatre as a powerful medium for historical consciousness and social transformation.

**Keywords:** Ola Rotimi; Historical Drama; Historiography; Historical Reconstruction; Postcolonial Theatre; Cultural Memory; Nigerian Theatre.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background to the Study

The relationship between drama and history Scholars have long recognised the mutually reinforcing relationship between drama and history. recognised by scholars as mutually reinforcing. Both disciplines seek to preserve human experience, although through different scopes: history through empirical documentation and drama through imaginative recreation. Aristotle, in *Poetics*, distinguishes history from poetry by arguing that history narrates particular events, while poetry and drama address universal truths about human behaviour and society. This distinction suggests that drama has the unique capacity to reinterpret historical realities in ways that make them more relatable and morally instructive to audiences. This implies that while history records "what

happened," drama has the liberty to explore "what could happen", offering deeper insight into human motivation.

In Africa, theatre has historically functioned as a repository of communal memory, often tied to ritual and performance traditions (Banham 22). With the disruption of colonialism, African dramatists embraced theatre as a space for cultural revival and political critique. Ola Rotimi (1938–2000), often celebrated as "the people's playwright", exemplifies this trend. His historical plays, including *Kurunmi* (1971), *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974), and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1985), dramatise key moments in Nigerian history, blending historical facts with creative licence to instruct and engage audiences (Osanyin 56).

Rotimi's contribution to Nigerian drama extends beyond entertainment to the interrogation of political and social realities. Ekevere et al. observe that Rotimi's plays engage questions of power, justice, culture, and political leadership, making his dramatic works important resources for understanding Nigerian sociopolitical realities. His theatre therefore provides a meeting point between dramatic representation and political reflection (Ekevere et al. 669).

Bakare's discussion of Ola Rotimi situates his drama within the political, economic, and cultural transformations that accompanied Nigeria's independence. He observes that Rotimi and other Nigerian dramatists sought ways of responding to the post-independence challenges confronting the nation, thereby demonstrating that Rotimi's dramatic practice was closely connected to wider questions of national development and social change (Bakare).

Rotimi's dramatic treatment of leadership also reveals the relationship between individual political conduct and wider social realities. Ekevere et al. note that his plays expose the moral problems associated with leadership and the responsibilities of both political leaders and citizens. This perspective reinforces the argument that Rotimi's drama can be read not only as literary representation but also as a critical commentary on governance and political responsibility (Ekevere et al. 669).

In *Kurunmi*, Rotimi reconstructs the nineteenth-century Ijaye War and explores the tension between rigid traditionalism and social change. The play presents *Kurunmi* as a tragic hero whose uncompromising attachment to tradition ultimately leads to destruction. Through this historical dramatisation, Rotimi reflects on broader national issues such as political rigidity, leadership failure, and resistance to change. Similarly, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* revisits the 1897 British invasion of the Benin Kingdom and the exile of Oba Ovonramwen. Rather than presenting the Benin monarch through colonial stereotypes, Rotimi humanises him and portrays the colonial encounter as a tragic conflict between imperial aggression and indigenous sovereignty. By retelling this historical episode from an African perspective, Rotimi participates in the broader postcolonial project of reclaiming African history from Eurocentric distortions.

In *Hopes of the Living Dead*, Rotimi shifts attention from kings and warriors to marginalised leprosy patients at the Uzuakoli Leprosy Settlement during the colonial era. The play dramatises their struggle against oppression and neglect, presenting collective resistance as a powerful force for social change. Through this work, Rotimi democratises history by foregrounding the experiences of ordinary people whose contributions are often ignored in official historical accounts.

Scholars have consistently emphasised Rotimi's significance as a socially committed dramatist. Biodun Jeyifo notes that Rotimi's plays possess rich historical content and ideological relevance, though their

historiographic implications are not always appreciated. Biodun Jeyifo observes that Rotimi's plays contain rich historical content and ideological relevance, yet scholars often overlook their historiographic implications. Biodun Jeyifo observes that Rotimi's plays contain rich historical content and ideological relevance, yet scholars often overlook their historiographic implications. Samuel Asein similarly argues that African drama functions as an archive of people's memory and collective experience. These scholarly perspectives reinforce the idea that drama can serve not only artistic purposes but also educational and historical functions.

### Statement of the Problem

Although Rotimi's dramaturgy is well known, most scholars prioritise his use of language, music, and stagecraft over his contributions to historical studies. Despite the extensive research on his dramaturgy, most scholars privilege his use of language, music, and stagecraft over his contribution to historical study. Jeyifo notes that "Rotimi's plays are richly historical, but their historiographic potential remains under-theorised" (Jeyifo 72). By neglecting the historical dimension of his works, critics risk underestimating the playwright's role in shaping national memory and identity. This study therefore interrogates

Rotimi's plays as historical narratives, exploring how they preserve and reinterpret Nigeria's past.

Although Rotimi has received considerable scholarly attention, much of the existing criticism foregrounds political satire, characterisation, and dramaturgy, leaving the broader historiographic significance of his historical plays comparatively underexplored. Ekevere et al. similarly observe that Rotimi consistently employs drama as an instrument for interrogating governance and national leadership rather than merely recreating historical events.

Beyond their historiographic significance, Rotimi's historical dramas also function as sustained critiques of leadership and governance. Rather than treating history as a mere record of past events, Rotimi reconstructs historical experiences to expose failures of political authority, ethical responsibility, and national leadership. This broader interpretive perspective demonstrates that his historical plays remain relevant because they illuminate enduring governance challenges in postcolonial Nigeria (Ekevere et al., 682)

### Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate Ola Rotimi's plays as historiographic works. Its objectives are to:

- I. Identify the historical basis of Rotimi's selected plays.

- II. Analyse how Rotimi uses drama to interrogate and reinterpret Nigerian history.
- III. Evaluate the thematic and ideological implications of his historical plays.
- IV. Discuss the relevance of Rotimi's plays to contemporary Nigeria's socio-political discourse.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to scholarship by positioning Rotimi as a custodian of history. As Asein argues, "African drama is not merely art for art's sake; it is an archive of the people's memory" (Asein 101). By critically engaging Rotimi's plays, this research highlights how drama can function as an educational and political tool, inspiring dialogue on nationhood, morality, and leadership. The findings will enrich African literary studies and offer educators, historians, and theatre practitioners's new insights into the pedagogical value of drama.

The political usefulness of literature is further demonstrated by Ekevere et al., who argue that literary works can reflect prevailing social problems, shape public opinion, and question structures of power. In relation to Rotimi, the findings suggest that dramatic literature can provide a forum through which audiences engage questions of political leadership and public responsibility (Ekevere et al. 699).

### **Scope of the Study**

The study focuses on three plays: *Kurunmi*, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, and *Hopes of the Living Dead*. These plays were selected because they explicitly engage with Nigerian history, making them ideal for historiographic analysis. While other works by Rotimi will be referenced, the study will not analyse them in depth. Where relevant, they will not be analysed in depth. This research relies on textual analysis rather than performance analysis, though performance implications will be acknowledged where significant. The study investigates how Rotimi reconstructs historical events, portrays historical figures, and uses dramatic techniques to preserve and reinterpret Nigerian history. It also examines the thematic concerns of leadership, resistance, nationalism, colonialism, identity, and collective struggle as reflected in the selected texts.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, relying on close reading of the selected texts to uncover their historical subtexts, thematic concerns, and dramaturgical strategies. Secondary materials, including books, journal articles, and critical essays, are

consulted to situate Rotimi within African literary historiography. This triangulation of primary and secondary sources allows for a robust interpretation of Rotimi's contribution to historical consciousness. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth interpretation of literary texts, allowing the researcher to analyze meanings, themes, historical representations, and ideological implications embedded in dramatic narratives. The study employs a close reading technique, which involves a detailed examination of plot structure, themes, characterization, language, and dramaturgical strategies in the selected texts. Through this method, the researcher investigates how Ola Rotimi adapts historical events and figures into dramatic representations, balancing historical accuracy with theatrical creativity. Furthermore, the research relies on documentary sources and secondary materials, including scholarly books, journal articles, literary criticism, and theoretical texts on drama, historiography, and postcolonial studies. The researcher consults these materials to situate Rotimi's works within broader debates on African theatre, historiographic criticism, and postcolonial discourse. The study is guided by historiographic criticism and postcolonial theory as analytical frameworks. Historiographic criticism is applied to examine how literary texts reconstruct, reinterpret, and question historical narratives, while postcolonial theory helps to interrogate Rotimi's resistance to Eurocentric representations and his recovery of indigenous historical voices (White, 27; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 87). The method of data analysis is descriptive and interpretive, involving thematic examination of textual evidence from the selected plays and critical comparison with scholarly positions from secondary sources.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The relationship between drama and history has remained a significant subject within African literary scholarship because playwrights frequently reconstruct historical events to preserve collective memory and interpret contemporary realities. Rather than functioning merely as fictional narratives, historical plays transform documented events into performative experiences that enable audiences to engage emotionally and intellectually with the past. Hayden White argues that history is shaped through narrative interpretation rather than the simple presentation of facts, making literature an important medium for reimagining historical realities. Within African theater, historical drama serves as an alternative archive through which communities preserve cultural identity and transmit historical consciousness across generations (White; Banham).

African theatre scholars maintain that historical drama is deeply rooted in indigenous storytelling traditions, rituals, festivals, and oral performance. Martin Banham observes that African theater evolved from communal practices where performance functioned as a

repository of social memory, cultural values, and political history. Colonialism disrupted many of these traditions, prompting African dramatists to reclaim indigenous histories through dramatic representation. Consequently, playwrights such as Ola Rotimi employ theater to recover suppressed historical narratives and restore African perspectives that colonial historiography either ignored or distorted. This understanding positions the playwright as a custodian of communal memory and cultural identity (Banham; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin). Ola Rotimi occupies a central position in Nigerian historical drama because of his sustained commitment to dramatizing significant moments in Nigerian history. Recent scholarship by Babatunde Allen Bakare argues that Rotimi's dramaturgy combines Yoruba oral traditions, Western dramatic techniques, music, proverbs, rituals, and storytelling to produce plays that are historically grounded and socially committed. Bakare further explains that Rotimi's historical dramas blend factual history with artistic imagination, enabling audiences to reflect critically on issues of leadership, governance, and national development rather than merely remembering historical events. This synthesis distinguishes Rotimi as one of Africa's foremost playwrights of historical reconstruction.

Historical drama in Africa is closely associated with historiographic criticism, a theoretical perspective that interrogates how literary texts reconstruct and reinterpret history. Linda Hutcheon argues that literature does not simply reproduce historical facts but questions official narratives by presenting alternative interpretations of the past. Similarly, historiographic criticism views history as a constructed narrative shaped by ideology, memory, and perspective. Applying this framework to African drama reveals how playwrights challenge colonial historical accounts and foreground indigenous experiences. Rotimi's historical plays exemplify this approach by reconstructing Nigerian historical events through African voices and cultural worldviews rather than colonial interpretations (Hutcheon; White).

Postcolonial literary theory further explains the ideological significance of Rotimi's historical drama. According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, postcolonial literature seeks to reclaim histories that colonial discourse marginalized or misrepresented. Historical drama therefore becomes an instrument of cultural resistance through which African writers recover indigenous identities and contest imperial narratives. In Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, the British invasion of Benin is retold from the perspective of the Benin people, presenting Oba Ovonramwen as a dignified ruler resisting colonial aggression rather than the barbaric monarch depicted in colonial records. This postcolonial reconstruction restores agency and humanity to African historical figures (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin). Scholars have extensively examined Kurunmi as a historical tragedy that interrogates leadership, tradition, and political authority. Biodun Jeyifo argues that the play transforms the nineteenth-century Ijaye War into a

broader commentary on political rigidity and ideological extremism within Nigerian society. Rather than celebrating Kurunmi solely as a heroic warrior, Rotimi presents him as a tragic leader whose uncompromising adherence to tradition contributes to communal destruction. Contemporary studies similarly suggest that the play reflects recurring leadership crises in postcolonial Nigeria by demonstrating the dangers of authoritarian decision-making and resistance to necessary political change (Jeyifo; Ekevere and Aninye).

The historiographic significance of *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* has attracted renewed scholarly attention because of its reconstruction of Benin history. Recent research emphasizes that the play functions as cultural memory by contesting colonial representations of the 1897 British punitive expedition against the Benin Kingdom. Yakubu Dennis Azegbebor argues that Rotimi uses dramaturgy not merely to retell history but to reinterpret colonial encounters through indigenous perspectives, thereby transforming historical drama into a site of memory, resistance, and political reflection. The study concludes that Rotimi's portrayal of *Ovonramwen* restores dignity to Benin history while exposing the violence of British imperialism.

Another important dimension of Rotimi's historical dramaturgy appears in *Hopes of the Living Dead*, where history shifts from kings and warriors to marginalized colonial subjects. The play dramatizes the historical struggle of leprosy patients at the Uzuakoli settlement against colonial oppression and social exclusion. Recent scholarship interprets the play as a major example of protest theatre in African literature, emphasizing its focus on collective resistance, class consciousness, and social justice. Apalowo and Poetri argue that Rotimi portrays theater as an instrument of emancipation that empowers oppressed communities to challenge injustice through solidarity rather than violence.

Literature on Rotimi consistently identifies leadership, nationalism, cultural memory, resistance, and social responsibility as dominant themes across his historical plays. Rather than presenting history as a static record of past events, Rotimi employs dramatic conflict, characterization, dialogue, and symbolism to encourage audiences to evaluate present political realities through historical experiences. Recent scholarship also notes that Rotimi's theater remains relevant because it addresses enduring Nigerian challenges, including poor governance, abuse of power, ethnic conflict, and national identity. His plays therefore function simultaneously as literary texts, historical narratives, and civic education.

Despite extensive scholarship on Ola Rotimi's dramatic style, language, and theatrical techniques, studies focusing specifically on his role as a purveyor of history remain comparatively limited. Existing criticism has largely emphasized his dramaturgy and political satire, while fewer scholars examine how his plays preserve historical consciousness and democratize Nigerian history through performance. The present study

addresses this gap by interrogating Kurunmi, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, and *Hopes of the Living Dead* as historiographic texts that recover indigenous histories, challenge colonial narratives, and position the playwright as both a theatrical historian and a custodian of Nigeria's collective memory.

### Theoretical Framework

The study adopts historiographic criticism and postcolonial theory as its analytical framework. Historiographic criticism examines how literature reconstructs historical events and questions the objectivity of historical representation (White 27). Postcolonial theory interrogates how literature resists colonial narratives and re-centres indigenous voices (Ashcroft et al. 87). These frameworks are particularly appropriate for Rotimi, whose plays simultaneously reclaim history from Eurocentric accounts and present it through an African worldview.

Rotimi's reconstruction of history extends beyond recovering forgotten events; it also provides a framework for evaluating political institutions and leadership practices from an indigenous perspective. His dramaturgy therefore illustrates how historical theatre becomes a site where cultural memory intersects with contemporary political critique, enabling audiences to reassess both the past and the present through dramatic representation (Ekevere et al. 676).

### Historiographic Criticism

Historiographic criticism is a literary approach that examines the relationship between literature and history, particularly the ways literary texts reconstruct, reinterpret, and question historical events. The theory argues that history is not an entirely objective account of past events but a narrative shaped by interpretation, ideology, and selective representation. Linda Hutcheon further develops this argument through her concept of "historiographic metafiction", which explains how literature simultaneously represents and questions history (Hutcheon 16). Thus, literary texts become sites where history is revisited, contested, and reimaged.

Within the African context, historiographic criticism is particularly significant because colonial historiography often distorted African histories and cultures. African writers therefore employ literature to recover suppressed histories and restore indigenous perspectives. Drama becomes a powerful tool for historical reconstruction because it transforms archival facts into living experiences that audiences can emotionally connect with. According to Obafemi, African playwrights reconstruct history with a didactic purpose, using theatre to educate society and promote social consciousness

(Obafemi 19). Ola Rotimi's plays clearly reflect the principles of historiographic criticism. In *Kurunmi*, he dramatises the historical Ijaye War and presents the conflict not merely as a political event but as a tragic struggle between rigid traditionalism and social change. Through characterisation and dramatic tension, Rotimi transforms historical records into a moral reflection on leadership and ideological extremism. Similarly, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* reconstructs the 1897 British invasion of Benin from an African perspective, challenging colonial narratives that portrayed the Benin monarch as weak or barbaric. In *Hopes of the Living Dead*, Rotimi dramatises the protest of leprosy patients against colonial oppression and foregrounds the agency of marginalised individuals in shaping history.

Ekevere et al. similarly contend that Rotimi's use of historical narratives is fundamentally interpretive rather than documentary. Historical events are reshaped to encourage audiences to reflect critically on questions of power, justice, leadership, and collective responsibility. Consequently, history functions not as a fixed archive but as an active instrument for national self-examination and political consciousness.

### Postcolonial Theory

The second theoretical framework underpinning this study is postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory examines the cultural, political, and psychological effects of colonialism and explores how formerly colonised societies resist imperial domination and reclaim their identities. The theory emerged largely from the works of scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and later Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. These scholars argue that colonialism did not only exploit territories economically but also imposed cultural and ideological domination on colonised peoples.

Rotimi's historical plays strongly align with postcolonial ideals because they reclaim Nigerian history from colonial interpretations and present it from indigenous perspectives. In *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, for instance, Rotimi reinterprets the British invasion of Benin and presents Ovonramwen as a dignified ruler resisting imperial aggression rather than the barbaric despot described in colonial records. By dramatising the fall of Benin from the viewpoint of its people, Rotimi restores agency and humanity to African historical figures.

Likewise, *Hopes of the Living Dead* exposes the exploitative nature of colonial administration and celebrates the resistance of oppressed leprosy patients who fight for justice and dignity. The play reflects postcolonial concerns about marginalisation, resistance, and liberation. Even *Kurunmi*, though set in pre-colonial Yoruba society, examines indigenous political systems and the consequences of rigid adherence to tradition, thereby encouraging critical reflection on African social structures before colonial intervention.

## ANALYSIS OF KURUNMI

Kurunmi (1971) is Ola Rotimi's dramatisation of the Ijaiye war (1870–1875), a historical conflict between the Ijaiye and Ibadan people in present-day Oyo State, Nigeria. The play is both a historical reconstruction and a tragedy that explores the limits of tradition, the dangers of autocracy, and the tension between change and continuity.

### Historical Context

The Ijaiye War Succession disputes following the death of Alaaafin Atiba of Oyo sparked the Ijaiye War. by succession disputes following the death of Alaaafin Atiba of Oyo. Kurunmi, the warrior-chief of Ijaiye, resisted the installation of Adelu (Atiba's son) as Alaaafin because it contravened traditional law — which forbade the son of a deceased king from succeeding him while his father was still buried (Ajayi 113). Rotimi seizes upon this historical conflict, elevating it to a metaphor for the challenge of reconciling tradition with emerging political realities.

### Plot Overview

Rotimi's narrative follows Kurunmi as he mobilises his people against Ibadan's attempt to crown Adelu. The play traces his steadfast defiance, the war's catastrophic consequences, and his eventual downfall. Kurunmi is portrayed as a tragic hero whose hubris blinds him to the need for negotiation and compromise (Jeyifo 65).

### Themes

**Tradition vs. Change:** Kurunmi embodies the rigidity of tradition, insisting that “the world is a dancing masquerade; if you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place” (Rotimi 42). His refusal to adapt leads to his tragic end, illustrating Rotimi's critique of blind traditionalism.

**Leadership and Hubris:** Kurunmi's heroic stature Kurunmi's pride undermines his heroic stature. by his pride. His insistence on absolute obedience to tradition results in the annihilation of Ijaiye's warriors (Ogunba 61). **Collective**

**Tragedy:** The play is not merely about Kurunmi but about the fate of a whole community, thus serving as a national allegory of Nigeria's struggles with rigid ideologies.

The relationship between excessive self-confidence and leadership failure is also evident in Ekevere et al.'s analysis of Rotimi's political characters. Their findings

associate hubris and inadequate foresight with leadership disasters, suggesting that the exercise of authority without sufficient self-reflection can produce consequences that extend beyond the individual leader to the wider society (Ekevere et al. 699)

### Characterisation

Kurunmi is shown as a strong but uncompromising leader, someone whose good and bad traits are hard to separate. Through his rise and fall, Rotimi explores the human cost of political obstinacy (Asein 104). Supporting characters like Olowu and the Ibadan war chiefs represent opposing forces of pragmatism and ambition, balancing the ideological conflict at the play's centre.

### Historical Reinterpretation

Rotimi does not merely reproduce archival history but imbues it with dramatic tension and moral resonance. By dramatising Kurunmi's inner struggles, Rotimi invites audiences to see history as a series of choices rather than as inevitable outcomes (White 28).

Rather than reconstructing history solely for historical accuracy, Rotimi transforms the Ijaiye conflict into a vehicle for interrogating the recurring crises of political leadership in Nigeria. Ekevere and Aninye argue that *Kurunmi* presents paternalistic leadership as undemocratic and retrogressive, particularly through Kurunmi's refusal to consult his followers, heed the counsel of his generals, or embrace negotiation and compromise. They further relate these leadership failures to contemporary Nigerian political realities, thereby demonstrating how Rotimi uses the historical conflict to comment critically on present-day governance (Ekevere and Aninye 87–88).

## ANALYSIS OF OVONRAMWEN NOGBAISI

Ovonramwen Nogbaisi (1974) explores the fall of the Benin Kingdom in 1897 when British colonial forces invaded, exiled the Oba, and looted Benin's royal treasures. Rotimi reimagines Ovonramwen not merely as a historical figure but as a tragic monarch whose errors and dignity define his fate.

Musa's study of the theatre of Ovonramwen demonstrates that historical reconstruction in Nigerian drama is inseparable from questions of power, memory, and political representation. The dramatisation of Ovonramwen's history, therefore, provides a means of contesting colonial interpretations and reclaiming an indigenous perspective on the Benin encounter with British imperialism (Musa).

## Historical Context

The British punitive expedition of 1897 is a major event in Nigerian colonial history. Rotimi reclaims this history from colonial narratives that depicted Ovonramwen as a despotic ruler whose defeat was inevitable. Instead, Rotimi humanises Ovonramwen, giving him psychological depth and moral complexity (Osaghae 91).

## Plot Overview

The play traces Ovonramwen's efforts to preserve the sovereignty of Benin in the face of British encroachment. Despite warnings from chiefs and priests, he allows the British mission to enter Benin, leading to the massacre of the Benin royal court. Ultimately, Ovonramwen is exiled, yet Rotimi ends the play with a note of resilience, suggesting that Benin's spirit cannot be destroyed (Ogunbiyi 70).

## Themes

**Colonial Encounter and Resistance:** Rotimi highlights the clash between imperial ambition and indigenous sovereignty, presenting Ovonramwen as a symbol of African resistance (Falola 202).

The conflict between imperial expansion and indigenous sovereignty illustrates Rotimi's broader concern with political legitimacy. Rather than presenting the Benin monarch through colonial stereotypes, Rotimi humanises Ovonramwen and portrays the colonial encounter as a tragic conflict between imperial aggression and indigenous sovereignty. By retelling the historical episode from an African perspective, the playwright participates in the broader postcolonial project of reclaiming African history from Eurocentric distortions (Ogunbiyi 70).

**Heroism and Tragedy:** The Oba's downfall is tragic but dignified, portraying him as a flawed hero whose humanity redeems him.

**Memory and Continuity:** The play ends with a ritualistic invocation, reminding audiences that history is not merely about loss but also about continuity of identity.

## Characterisation

Ovonramwen is portrayed as both compassionate and indecisive. His hesitancy contrasts with the pragmatism of chiefs like Ezomo and Iyase, who advocate caution. Rotimi uses this tension to explore questions of leadership and accountability (Asein 109).

Through Ovonramwen's moral complexity, Rotimi rejects simplistic portrayals of African rulers. Instead, he

presents the monarch as a compassionate yet indecisive leader whose political choices and limitations raise questions about leadership and accountability. This characterisation enables the play to challenge colonial representations of Ovonramwen and restore greater psychological and historical complexity to the African ruler (Ekevere 82).

## Historical Reinterpretation

By dramatising the fall of Benin from the perspective of its people, Rotimi challenges Eurocentric accounts of the 1897 expedition. His play functions as an act of cultural recovery, restoring dignity to Benin history (Ashcroft et al. 88).

## ANALYSIS OF HOPES OF THE LIVING DEAD

Hopes of the Living Dead (1985) is based on the true story of leprosy patients at Uzuakoli Leprosy Settlement who, in the 1940s, protested against colonial exploitation and demanded humane treatment. Rotimi transforms this historical episode into a powerful story of collective struggle and redemption.

Obika and Ojiakor observe that Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* attempts to reconstruct the historical image of the Benin monarch against colonial representations that portrayed him negatively. Their analysis demonstrates that Rotimi's historical reconstruction is not simply a reproduction of past events but an intervention in how the past is remembered and interpreted (Obika and Ojiakor).

## Historical Context

The colonial government often marginalised leprosy patients, using them as cheap labour while neglecting their welfare (Falola 275). Rotimi's dramatisation foregrounds their humanity, portraying them as agents of change rather than as passive victims.

## Plot Overview

The play follows the leper leader, Inyang, as he mobilises the inmates to demand justice. Through determination, courage, and solidarity, the lepers confront colonial authorities and eventually win better treatment.

## Themes

**Marginalisation and Resistance:** The play is a metaphor for the broader Nigerian struggle against oppression. The lepers' courage demonstrates that even

society's most marginalised can effect change (Irele 44).

**Collective Heroism:** Unlike *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, which focus on individual tragic heroes, this play celebrates communal action as the engine of history.

**Hope and Liberation:** The title itself suggests optimism, portraying history as a narrative of progress and emancipation.

### Characterisation

Inyang is presented as a visionary leader who combines moral courage with tactical intelligence. The supporting characters Etuk, Damba, and others represent different social attitudes toward oppression, from despair to determination (Ogunba 63).

### Historical Reinterpretation

Rotimi frames the lepers' protest as an allegory for national liberation. By placing marginalised figures at the centre of historical drama, he democratises history and challenges elitist historiography (Hutcheon 16).

Across these three plays, Rotimi emerges as a playwright deeply invested in using theatre to interrogate history. His works balance historical accuracy with dramatic intensity, transforming historical events into moral parables for the Nigerian audience. Collectively, the plays affirm that history is not static but a living discourse that shapes identity and informs national consciousness (White 30). Rotimi's dramaturgy reveals that the playwright is indeed a purveyor of history, one who engages the past to shed light on the present. His plays encourage audiences to question inherited narratives, re-examine traditions, and participate actively in nation-building.

### Summary of Findings

This thesis set out to examine Ola Rotimi as a playwright who functions as a purveyor of history. Through an expository analysis of *Kurunmi*, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, and *Hopes of the Living Dead*, the study established that Rotimi's drama goes beyond entertainment to serve as a vehicle for historical memory and cultural critique.

In *Kurunmi*, Rotimi explores the dangers of rigid traditionalism, using the Ijaiye War as a parable about leadership, generational conflict, and the need for pragmatic adaptation (Jeyifo 65). *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* reframes the colonial encounter as a tragedy of sovereignty, granting dignity to the Benin monarch while exposing the violence of imperial conquest (Ogunbiyi 70). *Hopes of the Living Dead* celebrates collective heroism, foregrounding the agency of marginalised

lepers and presenting them as symbols of resistance and hope (Irele 44). Across these plays, Rotimi demonstrates that history is not a fixed archive but a living discourse open to reinterpretation. His dramaturgy confirms Hayden White's argument that history, like fiction, is constructed through narrative choices (White 27). Rotimi's use of music, dialogue, and characterisation transforms archival facts into emotionally resonant theatre, thereby democratising history and making it accessible to a broader audience.

The broader political dimension of Rotimi's dramaturgy is also evident in Ekevere et al.'s analysis, which demonstrates that the playwright uses dramatic characters and conflicts to interrogate leadership qualities and their consequences for Nigerian political life (Ekevere et al. 699).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusion

Ola Rotimi can thus be rightly described as a "theatrical historian" whose works serve as an alternative historiography. His plays recover suppressed histories, question inherited traditions, and invite audiences to participate in shaping Nigeria's future. As Ashcroft et al. argue, decolonising literature involves reclaiming the past and reimagining it through indigenous perspectives (The Empire Writes Back 87). Rotimi's plays achieve this goal by fusing historical accuracy with dramatic innovation, creating works that educate, entertain, and provoke reflection.

This study emphasises the necessity of approaching African drama not merely as literary artefacts but as historical documents with pedagogical and political value. In doing so, it contributes to the growing field of African literary historiography and provides a model for reading other playwrights through the lens of historical inquiry.

This political and pedagogical function is consistent with Ekevere et al.'s observation that literature can serve as a platform for public engagement with political questions and can contribute to leadership development. Such a perspective reinforces the argument that Rotimi's drama possesses significance beyond aesthetic appreciation, functioning as a resource for political reflection and civic consciousness (Ekevere et al. 699).

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are proposed:

i. **For Scholars:** Further research should explore comparative studies between Rotimi and other African dramatists, such as Femi Osofisan or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, such as Femi Osofisan or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o to examine different models of dramatising history.

ii. **For Educators:** Rotimi's plays should be integrated into the Nigerian history curriculum as supplementary texts, allowing students to engage with the past through a creative medium.

iii. **For Theatre Practitioners:** Modern directors should continue staging Rotimi's plays, using them as platforms for civic education and public discourse on leadership, nation-building, and cultural identity.

iv. **For Policy Makers:** Cultural agencies should support theatre festivals and performances that promote historical consciousness, thereby strengthening national identity and unity.

By continuing to stage and study Rotimi's works, Nigerian society can harness the power of theatre as a means of remembering the past, interrogating the present, and imagining a better future.

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