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## Individualism Pitted against Dogma in Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*

Sanjeev Gianchandani

Eugene Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* (1959) was written as a response to and criticism of the upsurge of Communism, Fascism and Nazism during the political events preceding and after the World War II. This is explained further by Ionesco in the 'Preface' to the play wherein he states, "Rhinoceros is certainly an anti-Nazi play, yet it is also and mainly an attack on collective hysteria and the epidemics that lurk beneath the surface of reason and ideas but are nonetheless serious collective diseases passed off as ideologies..." through the liberating medium of theatre, Ionesco sought to put in perspective the notion of conformism to totalitarian discourses and compel the spectators to question the inherent meaning of being 'human'. His agenda is made clear by his remark that "...drama and ideology ought to move in two parallel lines; drama should never be its slave." This essay critically investigates how an individual in the universe of the play is pitted against forces beyond his control or the 'isms' that impede his definition of self in other words.

The very 'title' of the play is a deliberate construction on the part of the playwright. To explain his usage of it, Ionesco states, "When people no longer share your opinions. When you can no longer make yourself understood by them, one has the impression of being confronted with monsters- rhinos for example... and history has shown us during the last quarter of the century that people thus transformed not only resemble rhinos, but really rhinoceroses." The collective consciousness of the people is depicted in the very first encounter with the rhinoceros in the play; when "...a noise is heard, far off but swiftly approaching, of a beast panting in its headlong course and of a long trumpeting." The incapacity of individual responses is reflected in the verbatim reactions of the Waitress, the Grocer and Jean who state "Oh, a rhinoceros!" Through this mechanism, Ionesco examines the use of language and its function of communication and expression which in this context has been denigrated to a mere robotic response to a common stimulus. Elucidating, he states "I believe communication is possible, except when people resist it for a variety of different reasons: intellectual dishonesty, lack of attention, political involvement, temporary incomprehension..."

The insufficiency of communication in the textual framework of the play also filters down to a conspicuous absence of the family unit and the categorization of Ionesco's oeuvre as the "theatre of non-communication" as pointed out by David Bradby. The emergent loneliness of the individual is reflected in the mourning for the dead cat as a substitute for a child and the virtual inexistence of emotional inter-relationships between the characters. This is termed as "communal solitude" by Ionesco who revels in the "dramatic loneliness of the crowd" which unlike the choric convention, do not share the majority opinion but only comply with the dominant regime. Perhaps, it would be the safest to label Ionesco's work under the umbrella term of the 'avant-garde' defined by Roland Barthes as a "...means of resolving a specific historical contradiction" by the artist. One such example in the play is the incursion on the Grocer whose response to the rhinoceros is steered by the profit motive as he states that "it is no reason to break the glasses." Ionesco stacks the small-business owning bourgeoisie given their depersonalization and unsighted submission to mass perception.

Mass perception is also critiqued on its foundation of logic and rationality as symbolized by the Logician in the play who states that “fear is an irrational thing. It must yield to reason.” and the entire debate on whether the rhinoceros was Asiatic or African. Through these conversations, Ionesco dismantles logic as the fulcrum of Western philosophical discourses of Cartesian origin. He is uncomfortable with the idea of equating logic to justice as stated by Berenger and the reduction of everything to ‘method’ by the Logician. For, the destruction caused by the World Wars or the atrocities of Adolph Hitler cannot be justified or explained mathematically in the context of post-war Europe. The larger point is that the Academia has failed to explain bulk phenomenon for instance – rhinoceros. This is also echoed in Berenger’s remark “...when you suddenly find yourself up against the brutal acts, you cannot help feeling directly concerned.” In this frame of reference, Ionesco opines that “... [the] rhinoceros slogan of the ‘New Man’ that a man can’t understand: everything for the state, everything for the Nation, everything for the Race.”

The “everyman” and the “new man” figures in the play, is exemplified by Berenger who is the only character which constantly questions his identity in contrast and opposition to others. His existential ennui is evident in the statement that, “I feel out of place in life, among people...as if I were carrying another man around my back. I can’t seem used to myself.’ Ionesco avers that ‘...few individual consciences that stand for the Truth against History...against the rest of the world...They are heroes.” On the other hand, Jean is the foil to Berenger, a walking compendium of popular science, fashion and culture. He is unable to entertain a discussion, is overly concerned about appearances and popular opinion and is therefore a conformist. His attitude is echoed in his statement “nothing could be more natural [than life] and the proof is that people go own living.” Thus he does not negotiate with the hegemonic paradigms of normalcy. As does Daisy whose transformation is willful, an active choice to be with the majority which is illustrated in her statement “You get used to it...nobody seems surprised anymore to see herds of rhinoceros galloping through the streets.” Ionesco feels that “if anything needs de-mystifying it is our ideologies which offer ready-made solutions,” for him the fatal flaw of any society is getting used to a particular situation and not articulating resistance strategies to subvert the authoritarian vision.

The aforementioned point also connects to the deprivation of intelligence in post-holocaust Europe due to sudden conglomeration of inhabitants in monolithic systems. This is made clear by Botard’s remark “there is no clear thinking at the universities, no encouragement for practical observation.” Education is totalistic discourse preaches obedience as against independent thinking and consequently turns people into pachyderms. For instance, in the metamorphosis of Mr. Boeuf, B. Mangalam notes, “any kind of political activism is perceived to be dangerous to civilized life... [the play] brushes aside history as an irrelevant particularity.” Through the figures of Dudard (right-oriented conservative) and Botard (left-winged Marxist/communist) Ionesco seeks to render all ideologies as “de-humanizing” and propagates Nietzsche’s stance of “will-power” to re-establish the superiority the individual to counteract the dominant discourses. However Daisy’s worldview is escapist as she states that, “there are many sides to reality. Choose one that’s best for you.” Through this Ionesco seems to be parodying people who wish to continue normalcy in the midst of such atypical devastation.

The destruction and transmutation into a Perissodactyl is also representative of European neighbors turning hostile as the play materialized in the period of the Cold War. Nita.N.Kumar

observes that “the cold war was a period of rather paradoxical and polarizing experiences for Europe...caught between the dangerous tension and ideological conflict between two superpowers but relatively safe from state pressure at home, the European writers were able to abstract their experience of war and trauma, their questioning of the idea of history as progress and society as meaningful and relocate these issues in a metaphysical context.” Through this play Ionesco explores the meaning of survival in a post-war, contemporary urban European landscape. Berenger’s remark that “...we have a philosophy that animals don’t share and an irreplaceable set of values” echoes the chant of the modernist period of privileging of art forms and finding answers from the past. Kenneth Tynan avers that the rhinoceros is meant to symbolize “communism unquestionably; but also Nazism, Socialism, Calvinism or any other ‘ism’ that appears to threaten one’s selfhood...his piece is a defense of individualism against creeping totalitarianism...a concealed attack on reason as a guide to political conduct and on the very notion that logic may be used as a means of social persuasion.” The colour of the creature is dark-greenish grey and thus it takes on military overtones, also the animal imagery has the larger implication of subversion to uniformity and regimentation. This is highlighted in Berenger’s remark “there’s a whole herd of them in the street now! An army of rhinoceroses surging up the avenue...” again conjoins to the idea that they correspond to oppression, inability to tolerate dissent and the willingness to crush it. Also it stands for the Darwinian philosophies of self-preservation as against all-encompassing humanism which was the guilt of extant Europe.

According to Ionesco no mass movement is absolutely egalitarian but the central derivation is that of individual interpretation from it. We need to decipher what the rhinoceros meant to us. For Ionesco, “the police are rhinoceroses. The judges are rhinoceroses...revolutions are doings of rhinoceroses.” Berenger questions his understanding of the rhinoceroses by asking “are they practice or are they theory?” also he believes that the rhinoceroses are anarchic because they are in the minority. Accordingly, every inhuman regime numerically is minority prospered by the silence of the majority sense of solidarity ironically becomes a ploy as people want to be rhinoceroses, as statistics have changed and the substructures tilt towards the transfiguration. This also leads us to the question of “goodness”, the moment one sees good in evil, one is interpolated into the dominant ideology. This is located in Berenger’s perpetual anxiety to remain human and his ability to act in an unselfish way by helping Jean in his moment of crisis. The larger question that they play asks is what have we evolved into from our primeval stage of animalism.

The meaning of this monstrosity is also grappled with in the ending of the play. The stage directions are extremely significantly for this purpose as in the beginning, they represent the Church, the trading centers and the cafeteria as the foundation of society. In the last scene, “powerful noises of moving rhinoceroses are heard...stylized heads appear and disappear.” Also it is a movement of extreme ontological crisis and there is no difference between “them” and the “other”. Berenger is left alone in confronting his singularity, but the sentiments of responsibility and guilt do not evade him. It is also a moment of vacillation from him as he articulates it, “I should have gone with them while there was still time... I’ll never become a rhinoceros. I am the last man left....I’m not capitulating!” thus the message of the play is crystallized in this speech, which is of not drifting with the crowd and defining yourself by attributing value to human life and exercising the human capacity to analyze and question every act of society that makes you submit blindly.

Thus the play traces the trajectory of becoming a rhinoceros from being a minority, an aberration to being a choice and a dominant group. Ionesco uses dark humor for this purpose as for him there is hardly any distinction between the comic and the tragic. The play vindicates human courage over herd-mentality. Ionesco maintains that “the aim of the play was to denounce, to expose how an ideology gets transformed into idolatry.” He rejects all forms of ideological dogma and validates the autonomy of art and the individual. To conclude, in the words of Leonard. C. Pronko, the meaning of the play is clear as “Ionesco laments the lack of independence, of free thought and individuality that inevitably results in totalitarianism of one kind or another.”

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