

Dramaturgy of Eugene Ionesco

Rajarshi Mukherjee

Assistant Professor in English

Shyampur Siddheshwari Mahavidyalay

Howrah, West Bengal

&

Samayita Dasgupta

M. Phil student

Department of English

Calcutta University

India

Abstract:

Eugene Ionesco was a major influence in the post-Beckett dramatic scenario. It is probably unjust to simply label his plays as “absurd”. Ionesco experimented both with the theme and the content to capture and communicate the essence of a decimated human existence in a post war world of uncertainties. The paper tries to look into his dramatic art and correlate it with the canon of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’.

Key words: Ionesco, Beckett, Absurd Theatre, Martin Esslin, Albert Camus, Rhinoceros.

Introduction

Eugene Ionesco, born to a French mother and Rumanian father was one of the major contributors to the ‘new approach’ to drama that was prevalent during the decades after the Second World War. Martin Esslin in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, defines this ‘new approach’ to theatre as ‘absurdist’ which potently stems from a sense of uncertainty, loneliness and futility of human existence as an aftermath of the Second World War. The devoted faith upon nationalism and progress were all shattered by leaving behind a sense of incomprehensibility and a loss of human identity. The key tone for such an attitude was

summed by Albert Camus in his *Le Myth de Sisyphe* where he becomes a commentator on the situation of man in the 'heap of broken images' (T.S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*):

A world that can be explained by reasoning is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusion and of light, man feels a stranger.... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.

The theatre of absurd or absurdist drama was essentially post modern. Post modernity asserts itself after the exhaustion of high modernity, and applies to an ensemble of cultural features which are characteristic of Western society in the aftermath of modernism. Unlike modernists, postmodernists do not lament or yearn for the past. Postmodernity can be principally characterised by a rejection of every totalising form, decentralisation of power and focuses on celebration of difference and diversities. Hence the celebration of humanity, human dignity and individuality becomes one of the central concerns for postmodern works.

Method:

The primary texts concerning the study of absurd theatre as an artistic movement are numerous. However, the work of Martin Esslin is still the most authoritative launching pad for such an enquiry. A host of primary texts along with secondary texts have been consulted. The hypothesis has been developed using the methods of observation and comparison. The translation of the French works are available both in book and e-book forms.

Review

In the review of the plays *The Chairs* and *The Lesson*, Tynan calls Ionesco a 'self proclaimed advocate of anti theatre : explicitly antirealist', this triggers off a new debate and Ionesco in his reply clearly defends his art and establishes that he only intends to write plays and not build some sort of ideological foundation through them. Moreover, it is society which has created such a condition for man because, according to Ionesco:

No society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living from our fear of death our thirst for the absolute; it is the human condition that directs the social condition not vice versa.

Therefore, Ionesco found it necessary to do away with the particular language of society which was nothing but 'empty slogans' and 'cliches' trying to formulise the reality into some ideological jargon. Tynan's comment was mainly aimed at irrationality, ambiguity and failure of language that featured in Ionesco's plays and Ionesco counters Tynan's attack through his definition of a work of art, where he mentions:

A work of art is the expression of an incommunicable reality that one tries to communicate – and which sometimes can be communicated. That is its paradox and its truth.

Ionesco's dramaturgy is perhaps a reflection of this concept of a work of art, which explains his inclination towards Absurd drama. The lexical meaning of the word 'absurd' is something ridiculous. Broadly speaking, it refers to something that cannot be defined by reasoning or rationality. Ionesco much like other absurdist writers defines reality as something that is 'incommunicable' and 'indefinable' through rationality. The absurdist playwrights cannot be categorised to belong to a school of thought, it is the similarity of their attitudes towards the meaningless existence of man that constitutes the proximity of their creative impulses. This sense of anguish towards the situation of man becomes the common theme of most writers such as Samuel Becket, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet and some more who try to project the situation and truth of man in all its abruptness and absurdity. There are some other playwrights whose concerns were similar but there approach more logical: this includes Giradoux, Annouilh, Sartre and Camus.

What has fascinated Ionesco the most is the failure of language in communicating the disillusionment, trauma and nightmarish situation of man. Perhaps because of this reason we find that in his plays, conversations take place among the characters but without any consequence. In *Le Cantatrice Chauve* (*The Bald Soprano in United States and The Bald Pima Donna in Britain*) we find that the play opens with a conversation taking place between Mr. And Mrs. Smith where Mrs. Smith keeps on talking but Mr. Smith only remains quiet and clicks his tongue occasionally till finally he starts speaking :

MR. SMITH [*still reading the newspaper*]: Tsk, it says here that Bobby Watson died.

MRS. SMITH: My God, the poor man! When did he die?

MR. SMITH: Why do you pretend to be so astonished? You know very well that he has been dead these past two years. Surely you remember that we attended his funeral a year and a half ago.

MRS. SMITH: Oh yes, of course I do remember. I remembered it right away, but I don't understand why you yourself were so astonished to see it in the newspaper.

MR. SMITH: It wasn't in the newspaper. It's been three years since his death was announced. I remembered it through an association of ideas.

Similarly, in his play *Rhinoceros* we find, characters engaging themselves in some sort of confusing, inconsequential conversation rather than concentrating on the actual problem:

LOGICIAN: For it is possible that since its first appearance, the rhinoceros may have lost one of its horns, and that the first and second transit were still made by a single beast.

BERENGER: I see, but....

OLD GENTLEMAN: [*Interrupting BERENGER*] *Don't interrupt!*

LOGICIAN: It may also be that two rhinoceroses both with two horns ma each have lost a horn.

OLD GENTLEMAN: That is possible.

PROPRIETER: Yes, that's possible.

GROCER: Why not?

BERENGER: Yes, but in any case...

OLD GENTLEMAN: [*to BERENGER*] *Don't interrupt.*

In this way the conversation goes on and the logician keeps on putting forward some more of his confusing logical jargons which does nothing but heighten the sense of incomprehensibility, helping the playwright to show that no language is enough to communicate the problems and ramifications of existence.

Ionesco was amazed to find how some flesh and blood people transformed themselves into some other selves only to represent the world that is not real; a world that was imaginary and the author's own. It was clear to him that those two worlds are antagonistic and cannot be brought together, though he was also aware that the two worlds however antagonistic they may be, they exist simultaneously. This perhaps has brought unto his mind the idea of coexistence of, if not binaries then contraries. In most of Ionesco's plays we find that Ionesco shows two characters who are not only complementary but just the inverse of each other. In the Derridian sense, we know how meaning formation involves an infinite *play* of meanings including the opposite of that, which we attempt to understand. So does Ionesco try to provide us with a holistic vision of the reality we are into, its thick and thin, long and short. In *Rhinoceros*, we find Jean and Berenger, two friends who meet at a cafe. The characteristic differences between the two are made clear from the very beginning much like Didi-Gogo and Lucky-Pozzo in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* but the treatment differs. Beckett shows Vladimir and Estragon as two tramps on a barren land, waiting for someone named Godot. But in case of Ionesco's plays the characters are placed in a society furnished with all its elements and idiosyncrasies. Thus the sufferings of Ionesco's characters become all the more poignant. For, in the former Ionesco shows the protagonist of his play against a whole

group of people who are suffering from the disease of conformism to social values. In an interview to Claude Sarraute on *Rhinoceros* Ionesco says:

I remembered that in the course of my life, I have been very much struck by what one might call the current opinion, by its rapid evolution, its power of contagion, which is that of a real epidemic. People allow themselves suddenly to be invaded by a new religion, a doctrine, a fanaticism.....

Against the whole mass of characters such as Jean, Bottard, Dudard, the Logician, the Grocer's wife, the Old man and the whole society- lies the individuality of Berenger who tries to retain his selfhood fighting all adversities. The disease of rhinocertis is used by Ionesco to express the modern tendency for surrendering selfhood, for the security and comfort of the herd since defining and maintaining selfhood in a world of collapsing ideals becomes problematic. In Ionesco's own words, in this play he tries to hit upon a "new plague" that is symptomatic of "automatic systemised thinking", the idolisation of ideologies that "screens the mind from reality" perverting our understanding and making us blind. Most of his plays are an attack on what he has called the 'universal petty-bourgeoisie'. *Rhinoceros* becomes a tragedy of an individualist who cannot join the happy flock of less sensitive people who opt for a pachydermatous existence. Similarly, in *The Bald Prima Donna* through the couple and the other characters Ionesco shows the stagnant existence of people, they have lost their individuality, they can no longer feel anything strongly, and they don't have anything to look forward to with passion. Accepting all notions and conforming to the tunes of society their passion for existence is lost, they fail to communicate with each other, and language cannot help them. They engage themselves in meaningless conversations on a loop, and finally arrive at the conclusion that since they live in the same place and share the same room, they must be husband and wife. In the setting what also attracts the audience's attention is a clock that moves in the opposite direction. This perhaps is an attempt on part of Ionesco to show how inconsequential the conversations and actions of the characters are, which prevents them from moving ahead.

MRS. MARTIN: What a bizarre coincidence! I, too, have a little girl. She is two years old, has a white eye and a red eye, she is very pretty, and her name is, Alice too, dear Sir!

MR. MARTIN [*in the same drawling monotonous voice*]: How curious it is and what a coincidence! And bizarre! Perhaps they are the same, dear lady!

MRS. MARTIN: How curious it is! It is indeed possible dear sir. [*A rather long moment of silence. The clock strikes 29 times.*]

MR.MARTIN [*After having reflected at length gets up slowly, and hurriedly, moves toward Mrs.Martin, who surprised by his solemn air,has also gotten up very quietly. Mr. Martin, in the same flat monotonous voice, slightly singsong*] : Then, dear lady, there can be no doubt about it. We have seen each other before and you are my wife.....Elizabeth, I have found you again!

Mrs.Martin approaches Mr. Martin without any haste. They embrace without expression. The clock strikes once very loud. This striking of the clock must be so loud that it makes the audience jump. The Martins do not hear it.]

Conclusion:

From his childhood Ionesco was intrigued upon the *Punch and Judy* shows. In them he found a simplistic vision of the world itself that helped to lay bare the truth of existence. Later about theatre Ionesco comments that if theatre is about ‘enlargement of effects’ then it was necessary to ‘enlarge them even more’ , the strings that moved the puppets shouldn’t have been disguised but shown to move beyond the decent pale irony of drawing room comedies. He believed in the theatre of violence – something that would be ‘violently comic’, ‘violently dramatic’ so that it would shock the readers out of their complacency and awaken them to the reality in its grotesqueness. Perhaps the breakdown of language, complimentary pairing of characters, multiplicity or ever increasing number of articles (chairs, eggs, furniture in *The New Tenant*, Madeline’s coffee cups in *Victims of Duty*, human beings changed into rhinoceroses in *Rhinoceros*, size of the corpse in *Amedee*) are some of the shock tactics that Ionesco applies to create the desired effect. For his unique sense of play-writing, Ionesco’s plays have been grouped as *anti-theatre* and Ionesco himself has been referred to be a Surrealist writer by Richard N. Coe, but Ionesco himself has disagreed to be included into such a group. Surrealism was a powerful influence on literature which involved things such as automatic writing so that there was an impromptu effect and no tendency of human beings had to be suppressed or butchered into the hands of rationality. Ionesco maintained that though ‘surrealism’ had the spirit of spontaneity, it lacked lucidity . Ionesco said :

I believe that ... a writer must possess a mixture of spontaneity...and of lucidity; a lucidity which is unafraid of whatever the spontaneous imagination may give birth to.

It is perhaps this balance that Ionesco always tried to maintain throughout. As an artist and avant garde playwright he felt it necessary to make the readers perceive the reality in a new light and take them to the basics of ontology. He disliked actors appropriating the imaginary characters penned down by the writers and felt that it was some sort of a dehumanisation and

wanted to create plays that shall not be imprisoned by its time scale or by any other bondage of that sort. He tried to seek the 'living sap beneath' the frozen dead language of ideologies and formulas:

To discover the fundamental problem common to all mankind, I must ask myself what my fundamental problem is, what my most ineradicable fear is.

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