



Research Paper

Rhinoceros a play by Eugene Ionesco as a critique of Political Conformist Ideologies, Totalitarianism and Fascism

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ABSTRACT: After the World War II there was chaos and upheaval in Europe, the atmosphere of the continent was politically tense and it was caught up between a tussle of Ideologies. This upheaval and the destabilization of the entire socio-political atmosphere led to the spread of new Ideologies and Propaganda's. The basic conflict of this time is not between the one ideology and other but between the Self and the World, the major struggle was to not lose the self due to the external pressure and ideologies. This paper aims to explore how the spread of Fascist and Conformist Ideologies intensified this struggle of not losing the self and not succumbing to the thoughtless mass hysteria through the dramatic medium. Rhinoceros written by Eugene Ionesco has a strong political context; it is an attack on all Totalitarian and Conformist Ideologies that spread during and after the World War II under the regimes of Hitler, Mussolini. This paper aims to portray Ionesco's endeavor so as to attack all types of collective ideologies based on thoughtless action. Through the dramatic form Ionesco is trying to criticize and question the corrupt Ideologies that spread during the time of the Second World War. This play aims to expose the hegemonic forces of the Ideologies and their Conformist and Totalitarian nature, that consciously or subconsciously, transformed people into mindless puppets. This paper not only tries to make an attempt to question social injustices and explores how the civil society degrades under ideological pressure and hegemonic dominance solely through the dramatic form, Rhinoceros serves as a stand against the spread of Ideologies that threatens and curb human thought and freedom.

KEYWORDS: Totalitarianism, Conformism, Fascism, Communism, Nazism

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I. INTRODUCTION

Eugene Ionesco's Rhinoceros was written in 1959, after the World War II had ended and at the advent of Cold War in Europe. The play can be perceived as an allegory of the Cold War communist attitude of the leftists in Paris and the incursion of the Romanian youth into fascism in the late 1930s. The Cold War was a period of paradoxical and polarizing experiences for Europe, as its politics became more and more contrastingly ideological. The atmosphere of entire continent was politically tense; caught in an ideological conflict. The socio-economic scenario of Europe, as well, was affected by the War. Further destabilization in the ranks led to the proliferation of several new ideologies and propaganda's, rising faster than ever. "The basic conflict of the time is not seen to lie between one value-system and another, one ideology and another, but between the self and the world [1]". Ionesco puts forth this struggle between the self and the world, the internal and the external, and explores how conformist and fascist ideologies intensified this struggle in that particular era through the dramatic medium.

Rhinoceros, undeniably has a very strong political context. This play is an attack on all Totalitarian and Conformist ideologies, including Fascism and extreme forms of Communism practiced by the Nazis in Germany, Mussolini in Italy and by the Red Guards in Rumania. Ionesco is against all types of ideologies, and he seems to be supporting the perception that communism, like fascism or any other ideology like Nazism, is a variant of a totalitarian political philosophy and ideology, which curbs and deters human freedom. In Rhinoceros, totalitarianism is symbolized as a disease that manifests and mutates thoughtful human beings into barbaric 'rhinoceroses'; Ionesco here endeavors to attack all types of collective activity based on thoughtless action and this attack transforms his play into a very strong political statement.

Leonard Pronko, carrying forth a similar argument, declares that "The meaning of Rhinoceros is clear enough. Ionesco laments the lack of independence, of free thought, and individuality that inevitably result in totalitarianism of one kind or another [2]. We can see that Ionesco's play is clearly a response to the corrupt

ideologies that propelled during WWII, and afterwards during the period of the Cold War. Ionesco exposes the hegemonic forces of ideologies that, consciously or subconsciously, transformed people into mindless creatures when he employs and envisions these 'Rhinos' in the text. The 'Rhinos' are representative of the oppressed groups and the individuals who were forced to succumb to the collective hysteria which was precipitated by fascist and totalitarian ideologies. The following lines are from an interview given by Ionesco, depicting his plight surrounding the fall of his fellow intellectuals to those conformist ideologies:

"Yes. My youth was spent partly in France, partly in Romania, where I saw the hatching of the Nazi movement. At that time everybody was a Nazi, just as today everybody is an extreme Leftist. If someone said he was a Democrat then, he would have been lynched, and the best spirits of the time, the intellectuals, were Fascists, just as the intellectuals of today are Leftists. The banners are different but the fanaticism is the same [3]."

Ionesco, a troubled man of his times, had witnessed the fall of his kindred people into a pit of careless activity which rendered them senseless with no thoughts and opinions of their own. He watched the intellectual community succumb to ideological manipulation and as Althusser puts it, ideological interpellation. This mindless allegiance among the masses evoking their utmost devotion to any belief system without rational thought disturbed him profoundly. And *Rhinoceros*, the play, employing modern techniques of theatre and avant-garde styles of form, immersed in satire, was his response to depict and expose this inherent problem in the Western world.

Ionesco here explores multiple themes: of conformity, cultural and mass movements, morality and philosophy. It is not just totalitarianism of a particular variety, be it Communism, Fascism or Nazism, the play is trying to depict – but it tries to make a larger statement on the dangers of extreme conformity to any form of political ideology. *Rhinoceros* makes this statement while construing a human response to baffling a transmutation – an ultimate grotesque transformation that is employed as a device to evoke curiosity and horror in the audience.

The play gives the illusion of being rooted in an existentialist tradition, but is as much about the frivolousness and inanity of the human condition as it is about our historical capacity for cruelty and savagery as a race. Ionesco, through a bitter transformative satire, establishes the capacity of the human race to commit the paramount grotesque actions. *Rhinoceros* is permeated with animalistic groans, blows and panicky and naive human debility, showing us how it feels to have one's identity subverted and traduced. When a person morphs himself into a rhinoceros, he happily relinquishes his personal beliefs, hopes and aspirations in order to ascribe to a powerful collective. The play uses the techniques of the modern theatre to complete these effects, which would have been impossible to generate without advanced sound systems and manufacturing of theatre props. (The *Rhinoceros* mask was especially procured for this play.) The character's fictional transmutation is only complete with the actor's physical change on the ground reality – the stage.

The play carefully envisions and constructs incongruity, crafting out the absurdity present in contemporary thought and politics. The result of this is a play, whose unprecedented approach in itself is a tool that attacks the use of flawed logic and rationality; while at the same time attacking the ideologies or philosophical perspectives that only promote violence or mindless action, serving to hegemonize people. While the characters in the play are always speaking to each other, there is nothing resembling something of a communication between them. Each character within the play represents a deliberate fixture on the absurdist portrait of a society run amok: the protagonist, the best friend, the love interest, the coworkers, and the cafe personnel each and every character is shown in a dilemma and how these characters when threaded together resembles a portrait of a society which is flawed and is suffering.

II. RACIAL STEREOTYPES

The emphasis on race in the play expresses a strong disdain for fascism's pretensions to racial superiority. As the characters debate throughout the First Act and try to categorize the Rhinos as of Asian or African variety based on the number of horns they possess; one can sense the underlying current behind the debate has to do with more than usual classification and categorization of the animals.

The character who most closely imitates the course of fascism is Berenger's close friend, Jean. Jean is a racist, revealing himself to be the kind of person who judges people by the colour of their skin or in the play on the basis of the number of horns they possess: "...if anybody's got horns, it's you! You Asiatic mongol [4]". This remark by Jean is highly racist and alludes to the common stereotype about the Jews being the horned men. The European supremacist mentality constructs the images of the Jews, who are anti-Semitic, as the Devils and demons. Jean had suffered at the hands of the society and his own job in the capitalist modernist world has robbed him off of his individuality. This process in turn, made him vulnerable and he became a possible victim of totalitarian ideologies' hegemony that aimed to stifle individual thinking, rationality and consciousness. Jean here is symbolic of the entire functionaries of the state (the working class), who are vulnerable and can easily

fall under the spell of the fascist ideologies and beliefs that are dominant. Jean, like the endless masses of Rhinos, in the end fell prey to such ideologies and joined the wave of fascist sympathy like a mindless puppet.

III. MARXIST COMMENTARY

Ionesco not only tries to make an attempt to attack social injustices and explores how the civil society degrades under ideological pressure and hegemonic dominance solely through the dramatic form, but the play contains specific attacks on the rhetoric and logic of the 'Romanian Iron Guard'. The Iron Guard based its philosophy on the idea that fascism was a form of a 'natural law' under the rule of which the 'true Romanians' will regain and reclaim their superiority over the inferior races which are sharing and inhibiting the same land as them. There was an intense and deep rooted desire within the psyche of the Romanians to distance themselves from the other 'barbaric' races that shared their land and lived among them. All these desires and the thoughts of being the superior race and the ideology of the Romanian Iron Guard are portrayed in the play through the character of Jean. Here we see how the society was bifurcated into two halves where one was the superior one and the other inferior, this racial superiority can symbolically be understood by a Marxist point of view. We can fathom the fact that this division of the society into two classes – Superiors which can be understood as the Bourgeoisie, the class which holds the control and owns the entire functionary of the state, and the Inferiors, the Proletariats which comprised of the entire functionary of the state. The character of Jean in the play is symbolic of the entire working class, which is vulnerable because they are the lower ranking individuals within the society and are the comprising factors that have no identity of their own, this vulnerability of the entire working class made them prone to the Conformist ideologies and they readily fell under its spell. This symbolic hegemonisation of the entire working class the Proletariats and their struggle to free themselves from this hegemony of the superior races and of the Bourgeoisie is depicted by Ionesco in this play.

IV. IONESCO'S ATTACK ON LEFTIST IDEOLOGIES

Not only Ionesco is attacking fascism, political conformity and totalitarianism in this play, he is also trying to attack the ideologies of the Left, particularly in France. Ionesco here attempts a subtle attack at French Intellectuals who embraced Communism to the point where they started endorsing Stalin and his ideologies in their works in the name of their communitarian values and their allegiance to Communism. Botard, for example, is a character in the play who expresses himself in solidarity with his French Communist counterparts.

Botard is a young and narrow-minded person who is skeptical and obstinate. He is convinced that the outbreak of this epidemic of 'Rhinocerotitis' is just a right-wing conspiracy which was propagated by the press and consumed and digested thoroughly by the masses. Leftist ideology has so deeply seeped and rooted itself within the psyche and mind of Botard that he is unable to speak or think for himself, his rationality and thought processes are rendered useless and he is left incapable of taking actions on his own.

V. RESISTANCE IN THE CHARACTER OF BERENGER

At the end of the play Berenger screams "Well in spite of everything, I swear to you I will never give in, never! [5]" For Berenger, the protagonist, remaining human, when everyone else has transformed into Rhinoceroses becomes a responsibility that he is the sole taker of. His addicting habit of drinking is the only thing that helps the process of inoculating himself from the loneliness which is an inherent by-product of this epidemic. The irony here is in the fact that both his friend Jean and his co-worker Dudard chastise at him for his habit of drinking, insinuating that Berenger's addiction and dependence on alcohol to help cool down his nerves reveal a lack of will power and impulse control but, contrastingly, in the play it is these two, not Berenger, who succumb readily to the mass psychology and ideology of the 'Rhinocerotitis' (the epidemic). Though Berenger ironically escapes the human world through his drinking, in the end, he is the only character in the play who holds on tightly to his human identity. The fall of both Dudard and Jean is symbolic of the fall of entire masses within Europe who succumbed to the mass ideology and gave no thought to their actions, the entire population of masses were blinded by the conformist and totalitarian ideologies and sympathies, making them prone to social evils like Fascism and Communism.

Though in the play, the protagonist Berenger remains irresolute in his will, resisting the crushing tide of hegemony with the force of humanity, Ionesco takes note of the fact that, all things considered, one needs the power and friends of other to immunize and invulnerable oneself from social confinement and depression. An individual human who exists outside the group is less immune and has no or an exceptionally minuscule personality and identity, making him or her subsequently helpless against assault of conformist, totalitarian perspectives and belief systems.

Berenger, in *Rhinoceros*, is 'Resistance' against the world – he is symbolic of the entire humanity refusing to succumb to the grotesque epidemic of 'Rhinocerotitis'. Berenger, as an individual, is flawed but admirably courageous in his celebration of selfhood in defiance of conformism or totalitarianism. Berenger stands alone as a rejecting slogan against the mass production and dominance of one ideology and purposefully

avoids labeling himself into one specific group. Berenger's ignorance of all things political and inability to hold stubbornly to one mode of thinking allow him to remain human. Berenger battles various ideologies present within his society and comes to the conclusion that he cannot discipline himself to anything. Berenger's humanity, Ionesco implies to be, is the notion of constant suffering and pain – and apoliticality? This pathetic, absurd state in what characterizes Berenger's world that successfully enables him to keep away from the herd and join the ranks of these mass ideological movements. His constant suffering and pain remind him of his existence as a human being and light up a burning desire to express his individuality and help him not to succumb to the on-going mass hysteria.

“Well in spite of everything , I swear to you I will never give in, never! [5]” The above line stands as evidence: Berenger even after realizing the horror and the terror that conformity to any mass ideology brings, is resolute in his will to stand against the epidemic of ‘Rhinoceritis’ . His resolute will remained constant, even when he was the only human left in the land of Rhinos. There is a will in the character of Berenger , the will of responsibility , it is this will within him that prevents him from falling a victim to the outbreak of ‘Rhinoceritis’ . He cherishes this will of responsibility and takes up the task of not giving up to the mass hysteria. The last line of the play, "I'm not capitulating [6]!" is what that ultimately galvanizes him and he decides that he is not yet ready to give up on Humanity.

The ending of the play brings the impression of aliens encircling Berenger – but the protagonist still has got a lot more space, nearly the entire stage to himself, a stage which exhibits the protesting character in all his earned glory. The stage is exhibiting the struggle and resistance against the conformist and totalitarian ideologies which were present within the contemporary society.

VI. CONCLUSION

The spread of ‘Rhinoceritis’ in the play is depicted in the symbolic terms of it being an epidemic of right-wing totalitarianism and left-wing conformism. The rhinos represent an absurd world, a world which has neither intelligence nor purpose and was rendered useless and without purpose with the allegiance of the masses with collective ideologies like fascism.

All that remains of human civilization in the play is an almost unintelligible human-like verbal debris, unconnected fragments of logic, hollow figures posing as human beings, The image of human being metamorphosizing into savage and dangerous Rhinos begs to be read as a metaphor for something else, something which is more deeper, more dark and evil at its core, something which the playwright is not at the liberty to disclose or something so intricate that cannot be named. The playwright had to find something different a substitute the use of which would make the audience laugh and at the same time leave them disturbed and pondering upon the fact that whether their allegiances to certain factions are right or they themselves have transformed into those mindless beasts. These symbolic “Rhinos seep deep within the psyche of the viewers thus awakening within them a sense of responsibility and have them question their actions and impacts their actions have.

“Rhinoceros” the play is marked by a sentiment which embodies the betrayal of humanistic and political idealism, terror, pessimism, hate within the atmosphere of the society. All these emotions are represented through the monstrous fantasies of individuals transforming into ruthless and barbaric rhinos on the stage.

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