



Deconstructing the Binary: A Post Humanist Rereading of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at bursting the bubble in which the traditional reader lives when interpreting the Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. This rereading of the present text explores a new world of meaning to the reader who is victim of intentional fallacy and affective fallacy i.e. the human identity of both the writer and the readers make them value human self over the animal self. The play under present study is discussed by applying post-humanistic perspective in order to change the binary, placing animals and nature in the center, and shifting humans to periphery by shattering the anthropocentric notion. Post-humanism is a particular non-traditional way of analyzing the term 'human' and its relationship to the natural world. It works to challenge the traditional binaries between the humans, the animals and technology. The general reading of the play *Rhinoceros* tends to place humanity at the higher rank and degrades animals. According to the general reading, the play traces degradation of humans into animals. However, through this post-humanist rereading the current study unsettles the trajectory instead. According to this reading, humans have no intrinsic and inherent superiority to the rhinoceros. Therefore, there is no overt value in keeping the human identity while the whole society is turned into the society of rhinoceros. This sort of humanism is the heart of Eurocentric project which promotes individualism at the cost of community.

Key Words: Intentional fallacy, Effective fallacy Post- human, Individualism, hegemony, anthropocentric notion, Trajectory, Degradation, Intrinsic superiority,

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1. Introduction

Rhinoceros is a thought-provoking modernist play by Eugene Ionesco who, in this play, signifies the absurdity of human nature. It tells us the strange story of rhinoceros that have been seen plaguing a French town. The play revolves around some other characters besides Jean, a cultured and sober person, who meets Berenger, seemingly a foil Jean being an ill-mannered fellow at a restaurant. The usual topic of their discussion is Jean's criticism on Berenger for his absurd manners related to his habits and irresponsible attitude towards his job. In this scenario, a strange and unpredicted entrance of rhinoceros grabs the attention of all the people in the play under present analysis. In the beginning, the first rhinoceros is proved to be a harmless creature. Then, the second rhinoceros is a bit harmful as he is ready to trample an innocent cat belonging to a lady.

After this, the scene shifts to Berenger's office where other characters such as Botard, Mr. Papillon, Daisy, Dudard and Mrs. Boeuf are introduced. Everyone is worried to learn strange presence of rhinoceros in that town. Another scene shift is observed when one comes across Jean's house where Berenger is present to apologize for his ill manners. Further events disclose unusual transformation of the main character, Jean, to Rhinoceros.

The last scene portrays a grim picture in the house of Berenger where he is only the person representing the humanity because all other characters are transformed into rhinoceros. The transformation of the entire human race is much symbolic as it exhibits the main idea of the text under present study. Different characters in this play represent different attitudes towards life, but the only common characteristic which is shared by the characters is their herd instinct. The play under present study is epitome of Nazism and Fascism. It is an allegory which exposes the oppressive regimes.

The present play revolves around rhinoceros and human beings who represent two opposite species, representing two different extremes of life. Metamorphosis of all human beings except Berenger symbolizes blind following of human race. Besides, this play keeps animal species in the center, challenging the rhetoric of man-centered philosophy of life. By centering rhinoceros at the cost of decentering man, this play proves to be post-humanistic study. Hence, it shatters the grand narrative of human superiority. Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* contains all the elements which make it a suitable text to be analyzed through post-humanistic perspective. The application of post-humanism as well as its re-reading is much important as it enriches the text by giving it new meaning. The investigation adds new meanings to the play under present analysis.

2. Literature Review

In order to develop background information about the theory and the text under present study, various sources have been explored. Different books and articles have been exploited to have a better understanding of Eugene Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros*. The different researchers have analyzed the play confirming to the anthropocentric view. Gist of their investigation is as follows:

Matei Calinescu in his Article has discussed this play with respect to right wing movements of fanaticism in the background of Romania in 1930. He also discussed the play by comparing the crowd of Rhinoceros to the Nazi crowd. According to him, there are many characteristics in rhinoceros that make them similar to the features possessed by the Nazis (Calinescu, 1995)

In his famous article "Human Condition Between the Fantastic and the Absurd in Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*" Maina Cap-Bun sees the human predicament between the strange blend of





absurd and the fantastic. We see here that both the defiance and conformism tend to absurdity (2011).

“Literature and post humanism” by Jeff Wallace (2010), critiques the contemporary developments in the domain of post humanism and literary studies. We can observe a clear change in literary forms and shift in positions of literature. It critiques the work of Hayles (2000). It discusses how humanistic subjectivity is challenged by technology.

There are some reviewers who have attempted to explore certain sociological and literary facets of *Rhinoceros*. Their reviews are much helpful in building up background knowledge about research on the play under present investigation. Their reviews are as follows: David John Chavez’s review titled as ‘A.C.T.’S Powerful ‘Rhinoceros’ warns of the dangers of conformity’ traces elements of beauty in terms of diction, subject matter as well as its philosophical agenda. The play, according to the reviewer, displays romantic scenes which depict the playwright’s mastery over depiction of nature and its beauty.

Likewise, Penhall (2014), in a theatre blog explores multiplicity of meaning in the play. Published in The Guardian, the review makes it relevant throughout the ages of man. Rebeca M. Alvin does also explore certain sociological and linguistic features of the play, highlighting its relevance in the world in which man lives.

Gist of previous research endeavours shows that this play has not been seen from post-humanistic perspectives or reread through the eye of post-humanism. Therefore, the present research fulfills the research gap by investigating it through the lens of post-humanism.

3. Research Statement

Even a bird’s eye view of Eugene Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* is enough to give a strong impression that this play is a suitable text to be investigated through the post-humanistic theory in order to question grand narrative of human superiority to animal kingdom.

4. Research Methodology

Anti-humanism as a theory is a criticism on humanism and the preconceived notions about humanity and its predicament. The term ‘Post-humanism’ is relatively a novel trend which is a theoretical framework for the researchers of literary studies, sociology, technology studies and philosophy. It is a particular nontraditional way of analyzing the term human and its relationship with the natural world. It attempts to challenge the traditional binaries between the humans, the animals, and the technology.

As its name suggests the rejection of outdated notions of humanism, post-humanism is a philosophy that de-centers the human’s superiority in the cosmos. It is a reaction against humanism; it shatters the firm belief of human beings that they are the center of the universe and all other things are at the periphery. This theory places nature and Technology at the center and considers human beings as a part of nature not the whole. Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* is a primary source of the study; whereas research articles, reviews and internet-oriented sources are secondary sources of the present study. It is a thematic analysis in which investigatory method of research has been applied.

5. Discussion

The present research re-interprets Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* through the eye of post-humanistic theory and attempts to rip the traditional man-made concepts regarding his superior status in the world. Hence, by raising questions from post-humanistic perspective, it challenges the traditional man centered philosophy of life. On the contrary, it gives central place to animals which are usually an ignored entity.





Post-humanistic study challenges traditional concept about place of animals and human beings. This is not general method of interpreting a particular text in which men enjoy superior status in the universe. On the contrary, it gives due place to animal kingdom as well. General reading of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* elevates the humanistic features of the text and presents Berenger as hero who is considered as the saviour of humanity. All the other characters are considered as losers in the hour of trial because they follow the herd instinct and join community, leaving their individualism aside. This process starts from the transformation of Mr. Boeuf followed by the horrible transformation of Jean when he is going to kill Berenger. All the characters except Berenger follow the metamorphosis process. Some of them try their best to motivate Berenger as well as Daisy whom he is really in love. At last, Berenger remains the only person who does not undergo metamorphosis. Other characters in the play are transformed into rhinoceros. In this way, the outcome of general reading is that the people who follow the crowd and sacrifice their individuality are not the real heroes. The person who overcomes all the temptations emerges as a real hero and an emblem of non-conformity.

Intentional fallacy is a term which is used in interpreting a text on the notions set by the writer. It is a situation in which a reader considers the author as a source of the meaning. When a reader has general reading of the text, he finds that 'Ionesco is with the human's party.' He is going to prove that human beings are superior to animals. On the other hand, affective fallacy, a term, is used when one interprets a text on the notions set by the reader or considers the reader as a source of the meaning. Being active readers, human beings are biased readers who attempt to give superior status to human beings by degrading animals.

According to John Donne human beings are not at their best when they are isolated from others and the real worth of human being is in the community.

"No man is an island entire of island,
Every man is a piece of the continent"

A part of the main. (Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions and
Seuerall Steps in my Sickness- Meditation XVII, 1624)

According to Iqbal, the worth of comber is in river and it has no value outside the river.

Man blames other species for violence and considers himself as superior to other animals. But researches have proved that the atrocities committed by human beings during wars are far greater than innocent preys by animals. One cannot have any example of such cruelties committed by animals. On the basis of his experiments on the animals in the Zoological Garden, Mark Twain has come to reject the Darwinian Theory which states that man has ascended from lower animals. On the contrary, Twain has rather arrived at quite opposite result that man has descended from higher animals. According to him, after working on a project of comparing human beings with the lower animals, he has obtained quite humiliating result. His results show that man has descended from higher species to the lower ones.

"For it obliges me to renounce my allegiance to the Darwinian theory of the ascent of Man from the lower animals; since it now seems plain to me that that theory ought to be vacated in favor of a new and truer one, this new truer one to be named the Descent of Man from the Higher Animals"(Twain 1). Individualism is disease. The real worth is in community. Berenger who is the only human being at the last on the stage is not a winner, but a loser. The persons who have been transformed are now in a community. They can survive easily and happily.

On watching the last act beyond the curtains, one can dig deep into the intended meanings of Berenger who remains intact. He remains asocial with no one to talk to even. His lonesome life





is much important from post-humanistic perspective as it shows that those who remain in company are real living species. What is his purpose of life and existence? What is the use of his language and communication? His anti-social attitude makes him an ugly and unusual creature with no one to socialize with him. He looks ugly on the contrary to the beautiful species who are singing and dancing and enjoying the life in full swing. Being single human being, he fails to make himself as a normal human being.

The following lines express man's superficial attempt to disparage identity of animals. These lines are biased towards animals as: "Mrs. Boeuf: No! Poor Thing! taking him home!" (Ionesco 52). In this conversation, one can see that it is possible for man to reconcile with the nature and live with all the other species happily. But man wants his hegemony on the earth by considering himself the only living being who deserves respect and prestige. His superiority complex is unjustified attempt as he deprives other species of their right to exist on this planet. His unjustified complex induces him place himself at the centre, keeping animals at periphery.

The play under discussion is rich in savagery of human beings who are symbolized with the rhinoceros. But humans are more violent than the actual rhinoceros. Rhinoceros are natural for their unusual shape and acts; whereas human beings shape themselves as savages and act savagely. The following dialogue of Jean expresses the brutal nature of human beings as: "Jean: I'll trample you, I'll trample you down!" (Ionesco 69). Jean's words show that human beings are far more brutal than animals whose actions are natural rather than intended.

As far as the transformation of Jean is concerned, his attempt to kill Berenger shows how brutal human beings are. The conversation between Berenger and Jean indicates man's hatred for his fellow beings. This anti-human psyche of man does not make him a superior human being. Lack of patience on the part of man fails to make him as a sole owner of this universe. Instead, his misanthropic nature places him descending order against Darwinian Theory of evolution. Berenger's dialogue highlights misanthropic nature of his fellow beings who are too impatient to bear slight difference in his personality. "Berenger: You're certainly in a very misanthropic mood I like being misanthropic" (Ionesco 64).

Post-humanistic lens shatters the pride of man who considers himself superior to all other creatures. In the conversation, it is evident that so-called hero, Berenger, is a thorough pessimist who always sees the dark side of the things. He has a kind of pride of being superior to the other species. The following words of Jean express the extent to which man prides himself: "Jean: you always see the black side of everything. It, obviously, gives him great pleasure to turn into a rhinoceros. There's nothing extraordinary in that" (Ionesco 66). It shows that man's pride is unjustifiable as it is irrational approach of man to degrade other species.

The play under present study falls in line with post-humanistic perspective as it contradicts the narrative of man's superiority. On the other hand, it places animals at the centre, giving them central place in the cosmos. Here, Jean unveils the truth that animals are the living creatures that deserve the same scope as is enjoyed by human beings. Animals have right to live as we human beings have. Jean's words reflect the post-humanistic approach as the following dialogue gives primary importance to animals as a part of nature.

"Jean: I tell you it's not as bad as all that. After all, rhinoceros are living creatures the same as us; they've got as much right to life as we have!" (Ionesco 66).

Being an obnoxious and stubborn person, Berenger is not going to admit that all the creatures are part of the nature. This is post-humanistic attitude as it criticizes man's false notion of being a





superior race, advocating that he should not boast off their superiority, “Berenger: as long as they don’t destroy ours in the process you must admit the difference in mentality” (Ionesco 67).

Here Jean puts a very subtle question about the ways of the humans. It is misconception of masses that their ways are better than animals. “Jean: Are you under impression that our way of life is superior? “(Ionesco 67). Jean’s stance shows that he is skeptic of human superiority. But Berenger is talking in the same tone to prove man’s superiority over the animals. “Berenger: Well at any rate, we have our own moral standards which I consider incomparable with the standards of these animals” (Ionesco 67). These words of Berenger express the hierarchy of human beings who try to take refuge in so-called moral standards enjoyed by them. Humans have maintained their rule on the planet by propagating the sham moral standards. In fact, there is nothing like morality existing in reality. “Jean: Moral standards! I’m sick of moral standards! We need to beyond moral standards!” (Ionesco 67).

During their hot debate, Berenger challenges Jean about his views that if he is going to refute morality then what he will suggest in its place. Jean answered in a logical way that he will place Nature in the place of morality.

“Berenger: What would you put in their place?

Jean: Nature!

Berenger: Nature?” (Ionesco 67).

Jean’s statement regarding importance of nature is much important as it gives central place to the world of nature. Here, Jean is giving good explanation that nature is having its own laws. Laws of Nature are far better than the laws of morality. “Jean: Nature has its own laws. Morality’s against Nature” (Ionesco 67). This all shows that natural world has its own place. Man’s stance regarding his central place does not carry weight as it is shallow in nature.

Berenger’s narrative exposes the real nature of man’s existence upon this planet. Here, Berenger uses the same stent of morality and moral values which is normally used by all the humans to justify their rule in the universe. But Jean’s reply is very good solution to all the problems that we must get to primeval integrity. “Berenger: Are you suggesting we replace our moral laws by the laws of the jungle? Again, Berenger’s words indicate his so-called superiority complex as: ‘Jean: We’ve got to build our life on new foundations. We must get back to primeval integrity” (Ionesco 67).

One can find at another place where Berenger talks about mankind, individualism and humanism, Jean is going to denounce these meta narratives. The re-reading of the play under present study manifests man’s biased approach towards other species who are deprived of basic right to live a peaceful and stable life.

“Jean; Don’t talk to me about mankind!

Berenger: I mean the human individual, humanism...

Jean: Humanism is all washed up! You’re a ridiculous old sentimentalist” (Ionesco 68).

It is an excellent foppery of the man to consider himself the center of every happening. He considers that everything revolves round him. In act 3,

“Durdard: You think everything revolves round you, you think that everything that happens concerns you personally; you are not the center of the universe, you know” (Ionesco 74).

The so-called notion of civilization along with man’s struggle to be the master of the universe has deprived him of the beautiful blessings of nature. He has lost aesthetic sense. His partial approach





to world of nature has deprived him of common sense. In the third act, there is conversation between Berenger and Dudard about the transformation of Jean. “Dudard: Perhaps he felt an urge for some fresh air, the country, the wide-open spaces...perhaps he felt a need to relax. I ‘m not saying that’s any excuse” (Ionesco 75). One can feel the human predicament and sorrowful plight that he is craving for fresh air and to relax for some time.

Rhinoceros are considered violent and harmful with the general interpretation of the text and ignored certain very important lines like

“Dudard: They don’t attack you. If you leave them alone, they just ignore you. You can’t say they’re spiteful. They’ve even got a certain natural innocence, a sort of frankness. Besides I walked right along the avenue to get you today. I got here safe and sound, didn’t I? No trouble at all” (Ionesco 78).

Man has developed many reasons to kill others on the name of good and evil. It is very easy for man to declare any one evil and kill him especially in the case of animals. In the conversation between Berenger and Dudard ,

“Berenger: We must attack the evil at the roots” (Ionesco 80).

Dudard: The evil! That’s just a phrase! Who knows what is the evil and what is good? It’s just a question of personal preferences.”

Again, at a point Dudard says,

“I’m trying to be realistic. I also contend that there is no real evil in what occurs naturally, I don’t believe in seeing evil in everything” (Ionesco 83).

Man has distanced himself from nature and considers himself a separate entity forgetting the fact that he is part of the nature as the animals are the part of the nature.

“Berenger: And you consider all this natural?

Dudard: What could be more natural than a rhinoceros” (Ionesco 84).

These words indicate man’s misconception about the world of nature. He misinterprets nature and creates binary between himself and the other creatures. Man has introduced many concepts of normality and abnormality to prove his supremacy over other living beings. In this way, man’s negation of nature makes this text a post-humanist study.

From philosophical perspective, this play shakes foundation of man-made narrative which is one-sided notion of human supremacy. Berenger’s words present unorthodox view about ecology where the traditional concepts about man’s place in the universe carry no weight.

“Berenger: You seem very sure of yourself. Who can say where the normal stops and the abnormal begins? Can you personally define these conceptions of normality and abnormality? Nobody has solved this problem yet, either medically or philosophically” (Ionesco 84).

We can have a better understanding of Berenger’s views about the logic and rationality. If he was there with the rhinoceros then certainly he must have thought on the matter logically. Dudard says,

“If he was a genuine thinker, as you say, he couldn’t have got carried away. He must have weighted all the pros and cons before deciding” (Ionesco 87).

In the last conversation between Berenger and Daisy, we can have a real and unbiased view of Daisy as,

“Those are the real people. They look happy. They’re content to be what they are. They don’t look insane. They look very natural. They were very right to do what they did” (Ionesco 103).





The aforementioned words of Daisy prove to be quite rational and unbiased. There is support and partisanship for animals, giving them the status ordained by nature. There is voice for the world of nature. Daisy succeeds in giving due place to the world of animals. This dialogue falls in line with the theory of post-humanism which rejects traditional notions about man and animals. These words preach just place for animal kingdom.

Rereading of the play under present analysis, one comes across existentialist notions about life. At this point, there is debate on who is right and who is wrong. The arguments of Berenger are funny sort of argument. He slaps her face. This is a point where humanity fails to deal with the things politely. This was the end of human argument and the true face of savagery inside the man. Daisy says, "It's because you've run out of arguments, that's why" (Ionesco 104). At the last moments of the conversation between Berenger and Daisy, we can infer how the biased judgment of humans can restrict them from listening to the melodies of nature. Daisy says,

"Listen, they are singing

Berenger: They are not singing they're roaring.

Daisy: You don't know the first thing about music, poor dear and look, they're playing as well and dancing.

Daisy: They are beautiful.

Daisy: They are like gods.

Daisy: You mustn't be jealous, my dear" (Ionesco 104).

At last, Berenger who is alone manifests failure of human kind in this perspective. His lonesome presence on the stage does not make him a hero. He is having nobody to share his grief with. On the other hand, all the animals are enjoying, singing and dancing. Daisy advocates the case of animals by recounting the qualities of the life they are enjoying. "Poor little thing left alone in this world of monsters!" (Ionesco 105).

At the end of the play, we can see the shattering of human belief on the main pillar of civilization. A single person cannot make a society. His condition shows lack of communication. It is shattering of language. Language has failed to carry the emotions of humans. Berenger tried his best to convince Jean, Dudard and Daisy. It is a critique on human pride over the language and civilization. Here, we can observe the ridicule of grand narratives of the society. There is complete breakdown of communication and failure of language, Berenger is talking to himself,

"The only solution is to convince them... ..But what language do I speak? What is my language?" (Ionesco 106).

Man considers himself superior to all other species on the basis of logic. This play clears the very idea of logic and absurdity in the mind of the reader. The world of logic is ridiculed because of its limitations and we observe the world of absurdity is governing the whole play. We look at different characters who posed themselves as rational beings are not rational in the real sense of the world, same as humans considers them superior are not superior in the real sense of the world. The question of the number of Rhinoceros and its answers given by logician is critique of the logical reasoning in the world in which absurdity prevails. The very echoing of word "nonsense" epitomizes the nonsensical world.

The detached observance and personal involvement in a situation can give difference of final judgment. Logical distance really matters while looking at certain concept. According to Berenger, life is a world of dream. It is an illusion of such narratives which falsify human notions about cosmos. Man always tries to analyze the reality of the world by putting himself in the centre





and assigning other species the marginal space. This very idea of the human beings is same like the reality of the world as dream.

6. Conclusion

To summarize the whole discussion, it is substantiated that man as well as the animals is the part of the nature. But man's self-centered approach makes him blind to the fact that animal kingdom is as sweet as male society. This biased approach deprives him of common sense. In this regard, the present research successfully questions the narrative of man's superior nature by relating the characters for the play under present study. Naturally, both human beings and animals enjoy equal status in the plan of the universe. In this way, post-humanistic analysis of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* gives primary status to animals on the basis of their good qualities.

In the play, post-humanistic study proves that rhinoceros are more beautiful than human characters. They are singing and dancing and enjoying their life. They have no worries in their life. They are ready to enjoy the life by sharing this universe with other species. They are not jealous of the others. They are not skeptic like Botard; they are not opportunist like Dudard; they are not bureaucratic like Papillon; they are not criticizing at every moment like Jean and they are not casual like Berenger. They are welcoming all the rhinoceros joining them without any considerations of cast, color and creed.

It is cruelty on the part of human beings to ignore the other species and maintain anthropocentric notion. To maintain his hegemony, man blames animals describing them as violent and cruel towards human beings. From post-humanistic lens, the play's characters undergo metamorphosis and from the experiments of Mark Twain it is crystal clear that man is greedier, cruel, quarrelling, and savage than the animals. In the play we can have a better idea that human characters are more violent and intriguing than the rhinoceros.

Towards the end of the play, we can have better idea that man feels proud of his civilization. Language, the main tool of the human civilization, has proved to be unable to carry the emotions and has failed to solve the problems of humans. We can see how so-called hero Berenger is unable to convince the others, burning in the fire of isolation.

The general reading of the play *Rhinoceros* tends to place humanity at the higher rank and degrades animals. According to this reading, the play traces degradation of humans into animals. However, the post-humanist rereading proves that the current study unsettles the trajectory instead.

According to this reading, humans have no intrinsic and inherent superiority to the rhinoceros. Therefore, there is no overt value in keeping the human identity where the whole society is turned into the society of rhinoceros. This sort of humanism is the heart of Eurocentric project which promotes individualism at the cast of community.

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