The Search for Immortality in the Exit the King

By

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ABSTRACT

Literature has always been one of the most influential ways of revealing the existential problems of man at any era. Dramatic art has been promising more in this realm. This paper deals with the dramatic work of Ionesco Exit the King to reveal how the playwright has tried to manifest one of the difficulties of man in understanding and facing the very reality of his life that is death and his futile search for immortality as a soothing yearning from the fear of death. The playwright’s techniques on this line in the article would be introduced and analyzed.

Keywords: Drama; immortality; Exit the King.

INTRODUCTION

The play Exit the King written by Ionesco was first performed at Paris. Later, it was translated in English and was staged in 1962. It is the third famous play of Ionesco. The protagonist of the play is the King. It opens with the appearance of King. The King who has a tacit in creating nature and literary pieces like creating the sun on his birthday, taking fires from the gods, and composing comedies and tragedies adapting the name of Shakespeare is at the mercy of the fear of approaching death upon that he has no power. At the beginning of his kingdom, there were thousands of millions of people in his tyranny. The majority of whom have been vanished except a thousand old people who still inherit the memory of his time and a few people including his first wife (Marguerite), his second wife (Marei), a servant (Juliet), a guard and a Doctor. The whole illustration of the past of his emperor can be envisaged in what Marguerite asserts at the beginning of the play providing the audience with the dignity and nobility of his time: “and now only about a thousand old people left. Less, even now, while I’m talking, they’re passing away”. This manifestation is consummated by Marie: “there are forty-five young people too” (EK, 15). The king is at the threshold of death but it is highly demanding on his consciousness to encounter death after living for two hundred and eighty three years. He has had so many years to get prepared for the death. Like all humanity in the past and the present, he has fallen in the reverie of death denial as a kind of relief for its seemingly harrowing acceptance. For Sure “Exit the King merits special mention: one of Ionesco’s most obstinate testimonies on his personal obsession with death and without doubt the most intimate play of his entire legacy (Angeles, 2011)”.

The way the stream of the play in the treatment of his wives and the assertions of the doctor has been manipulated by Ionesco to enable the king face the death may prove beneficial for the clarification of the plight of modern man who has been more alienated and disillusioned than the man in the past on the one hand; and soothing for the distracted consciousness of the modern man to lead a better life with a better insight of existence on the other hand. The combat of the king with the harbinger of the death sheds light on his harrowing dilemma at the macro level and can provide a kind of psychotherapy for the humanity, especially modern man, at a macro level. Hinging upon psychology counseling, we detect the real implications of the characters’ assertions to show how the king is trying to face this bitter but inevitable reality and help the audience and the modern man acquire a better vision of this imminent reality of his life knowing the fact that he is more at the exposure of dangers of the technology and the era idiosyncrasies.
DISCUSSION

Ionesco in this play like his other works is appreciated for his psychological and, in a sense, political implications. “Ionesco realized death and mortality at a very young age, and this subject would remain a continual thematic reference point throughout all of his writing” (Adelizzi, 2008).

In this study, he will be appreciated for the existential revelation implications. He has a tendency to project upon us the imminent presence and threat of death. He has delicately portrayed the man’s search for immortality through the denial of the inevitable death. Berenger who has long time to think of this reality now cries out that he has had no time. Now that he has been befuddled by the promising features of death, he resents his being and his existence. “I do not know quiet what’s wrong with me. My legs are a bit stiff. I had a job to get up, and my feet hurt! I must get some new slippers. Perhaps I’ve been growing” (EK, 3). Instead of getting closer to the acceptance of his death and his long age, he turns to the term growth to soothe his inner fear of death. Now “he feels that death will come soon and howls against his fate” (Fabre, 2009).

Two of the characters, Marguerite and Marie, are realistic and try to orientate his consciousness towards fathoming reality. This can be seen in the doctor’s assertion in his attempt to remind the king of his long age and, passage of time, and the arrival of death.

Your majesty, several decades or even three days ago, your empire was flourishing. In three days, you’ve lost all the wars you won. And those you lost, you’ve lost again. [While our harvest rotted in the fields and our continent became a desert, our neighbor’s land turned green again. And it was a wilderness last Thursday!] The rockets you want to fire can’t even get off the ground. Or else they leave the pad and drop back to earth with a thud (EK, 30). His wives act as two edges of reality and fallacy. One, Marie, tries to elude his consciousness and highlight immortality by her search for more joy and life beauties while, Marguerite tries to remind him of his futile envisage of immortality and long life and more life. Although the king has been told that “You’re going to die in an hour and a half. You’re going to die at the end of the play” (p.3), he does not succumb to his failed destiny and his unavoidable death. This initially may remind one of Ionesco’s own effort in handling this dilemma which is in fact the dilemma of all of us. Ionesco in his interview (Bonnefy, 1966) has asserted clearly that while writing this play “I was on a different level of consciousness” “I was ill and frightened of death”. He clearly reveals that “I told myself that one could learn to die. That I could learn to die, that one can also help other people to die, this seems to be the most important thing we can do, since we’re all of us dying men who refuse to die, this play is an attempt to apprenticeship in dying” (Bonnefy, 1966).

To depict such a run-down situation of mankind, all the dramatic elements have been delicately deployed to show the approaching steps of death. The setting, the language, the dominant themes, and even the characters are all in harmony with the manifestation of theme under discussion. This is a technique which has been manipulated by Ionesco through the course of the play. The setting is confined to the court with no description of outside world depicting an emperor without people revealing the lost monarchy. The theme is the question of prevalent death and absurdity and the misery of succumbing to death and its inevitability. The characters have been given rules to ignite and cultivate the king’s consciousness on the line of achieving reality of the end of life for the king’s life and era. Although Marguerite has been told that “You’re going to die in an hour and a half. You’re going to die at the end of the play” (p.3), she does not succumb to his failed destiny and his unavoidable death. This initially may remind one of Ionesco’s own effort in handling this dilemma which is in fact the dilemma of all of us. Ionesco in his interview (Bonnefy, 1966) has asserted clearly that while writing this play “I was on a different level of consciousness” “I was ill and frightened of death”. He clearly reveals that “I told myself that one could learn to die. That I could learn to die, that one can also help other people to die, this seems to be the most important thing we can do, since we’re all of us dying men who refuse to die, this play is an attempt to apprenticeship in dying” (Bonnefy, 1966).

To depict such a run-down situation of mankind, all the dramatic elements have been delicately deployed to show the approaching steps of death. The setting, the language, the dominant themes, and even the characters are all in harmony with the manifestation of theme under discussion. This is a technique which has been manipulated by Ionesco through the course of the play. The setting is confined to the court with no description of outside world depicting an emperor without people revealing the lost monarchy. The theme is the question of prevalent death and absurdity and the misery of succumbing to death and its inevitability. The characters have been given rules to ignite and cultivate the king’s consciousness on the line of achieving reality of the end of life for the king’s life and monarchy. The once mighty king is now unable to do anything for saving his own life. In the campaign of the two wives for the affection and status in the good days of the kingship, now the two reveal to have acted as two different or pseudo couple of the king’s consciousness. Marie has been the indulgent of the king in joy and pleasure of life with her youth and beauty; Marguerite, on the other hand, has always been reminder of the approaching death despite being turned down time and again. From the Freudian view point, one has been the ego and the other the superego. The battle of the two egos can be detected in the mind and the behavior of so many a people of the modern time and era. Although Marguerite has been time and again misbehaved in the course of the play for being jealous and a “pompous bluestocking” (13), temporarily, the king comes to a better insight and appreciates Marguerite’s advices. His inner problems with this imminent fear compels him to come up with this idea that Marie is no longer a comfort and realizes that Marguerite, “who gave him no warmth or joy, but who, having accepted all that death involves, is the only one able to assist him” (Knowlson, 1988). She tries to bring back his own identity regardless of the lifelong king identity he has had. This would pave the way for the king to face death like a normal human being; that like all other he is a mortal being, too. What she is trying to do is to “untie every knot and ravel out the tangled skein that binds him to life” (EK, 66). These project upon the reader and the viewer the idea that modern obsessed man should go over his own revision of his identity and his reality of being and the reality of his imminent death. Indeed, he will “neither give up control of what’s left of the kingdom he has brought to ruin, nor accept the inevitable and come to terms with his imminent death. Not surprisingly, mayhem ensues” (Palmbeachdramaworks.org). This is what Ionesco may have had in mind in conveying the intended theme to the audience. He has tried to illustrate the psychology failure and turmoil in the king’s behavior and the drastic alterations in his appearance, physique, and his health. The wrinkles in his face and forehead show the passage of time and the end of youth. The presence of doctor signifies that the death is unavoidable and that his health has failed in every
respects. The king has not acquired enough courage to face the death and get rid of the immortality ambition. This is clear in doctor’s assertion: “however much he moans and groans, he’s started to reason things out. He’s complaining, protesting, and expressing himself. That means he has begun to resign himself” (EK, 46).

We see this in his denial of the very immediate problems with his health regarding his failed glorious body as a king figure: “limping? I’m [he is] not limping” (19). The doctor tries to help him out by bringing him back to reality through revealing his failed health. The king turns to his despot mood and asserts to determine his own death but in reality, he has lost the power of choice and in an infantile manner turns to lame excuses for his lack of readiness to face death. Gradually, he gets to the understanding of the prime significance of life even in the eyes of those who condemn life of difficulties and hardships. However, while this status provides them with ultimate power to command everybody and to do everything they wish, they are blind to see the fact that their prestigious position in fact prevents them from achieving self-consciousness and understanding their true nature. Though initially emerging as characters who are the embodiments of infinite power and authority, what they experience throughout the plays gradually forces them to admit that the crowns and the titles they possess are mere illusions. It is only after losing their assigned roles, and being reduced to ordinary people, that they can be aware of their non-being. Shakespeare’s Richard becomes an eloquent poet to compensate for his loss of status, yet Ionesco’s Berenger is even more (Zümrü, 2004).

This is well manifested in the view of the king towards his guard and Juliet, the maid. To him, these hardships are the proof of life and existence. In the eye of the king, Juliet’s seemingly drudgery of the routine life gains incredible significance as they are what enable us understand those as the proof of our existence and being.

King: It’s wonderful to feel bored and not to feel bored, too, to lose one’s temper, and not to lose one’s temper, to be discontented and to be content. To practice resignation and to insist on your rights. You get excited, you talk and people talk to you, you touch and they touch you. All this is magical, like some endless celebration (EK, 64).

The king in his endeavor to soothe his innermost feelings of repent over the lost days and in his attempt to find a way of getting along with the misery of facing death turns to offering comments on the beauties of life to the poor maid. He poses Juliet lots of questions; however, she fails to grasp what exactly the king is getting at. All the poor maid is concerned with is demanding routine responsibilities she is shouldering to which like other aspects of life the king has paid no attention. It reminds him of this reality that life could have been more enjoyable to him and that he could have led a better life than this. “I never went everywhere I could. My life could have been so full” (EK, 62). It signifies the harrowing condition of so many modern men who are at the mercy of the modern age requirement and the technology capture. They scarify all their being for the sake of achieving an identity of a certain type or making a life of a certain style like a bus driver who follows the same route all his lifelong to make his life and lead his being. Due to this monotonous nature of life style, the whole being resembles repetition of the whole being in a few seconds. Berenger who has experienced a life of span of two hundred and eighty three asserts that he has come to the world “five minutes ago” and ‘got married three minutes ago”. Earlier he confessed that he “had all the time in the world but then due to scooping presence of death despairingly mentions that “I never had the time” (EK, 46). He should have learned that “Having established an uncomfortable modus Vivendi with the world of objects, the individual has to face the ultimate threat that the world holds for the individual, that of death and extinction (Isabelle, 1985).

His sheer indulgence in the joys of the world and his deep reverie of immortality of his life and his monarchy, have impeded his understanding of the inevitable reality of death. He has denied the thought of death in his deep sub consciousness by prolonging death arrival. Death may seize him “in forty, fifty, three hundred years, or even latter, when he wants, when he has the time, when he makes up his mind” (22).

He has forgotten this reality that “the illusion of living in a kind of time which exists in the mind” cannot exclude him from the “measured implacable time of the clock which has brought about his down fall” (Norrish, 1988). All his yearning for getting back to the past fails and remains at the level of speech.

King: let time turn back in tracks
Marie: let us be as we were twenty years ago.
King: let it be last week
Marie: let it be yesterday evening. Turn back, time! Turn Back! Time, stop! (Ek, 35) On the line of capturing the idea of Ionesco that all past and future would fade away is something which can be detected in the characters’ words.
Marguerite: everything is yesterday.
Juliet: even “today” will be “yesterday”.
Doctor: all thing pass into the past.
Marie: my darling king, there is no past, there is no future.
Remember, there is only a present that goes right onto the end, everything is present, be present, be the present.
King: also, I'm only present in the past (50).

Beregner by the passage of time gains cognizance of the time, death, and the end of his being. When he realizes the reality of his being, he realizes that it is high time he had to go. He is the macro level manifestation of all modern being who die for the sheer meaning of being and lead their life meaninglessly and when they get to understand the reality of being they find themselves at the threshold of death, old age, and vigor. It asserts this reality that although human being has captured universe, has given rise to so many things, and he has even interfered in the creation of other creatures, he has proved unable in determining and understanding the reality his being and making himself immortal. The reason for this catastrophe is the King himself. After ruling the country for over 400 years as a megalomaniac monarch with numerous discoveries to his credit including the splitting of the atom, the time has come for him to shuffle off this mortal coil. This is a fact he simply refuses to accept—despite the warnings of his wife, Queen Marguerite that he "will die at the end of the play;," a sentiment echoed by his Doctor (Hollander, 2009)

As it becomes clear that the king has been unable to become immortal even after 283 years of living, in another sense it reflects the absurdity of his being and his life as he never gets to the real meaning of his being and he can't stop helping himself. Like other characters he has fallen in the habit of self survey of what is going to happen. What they have been doing so far?

Marguerite: What did I dream about, you ask yourself? What was it happened? Who was I kissing? Who did I love? What were I saying and what was I told? Then you find you're left with a vague regret for all those things that were or seemed to have been. You no longer know what it was that was there all around you. You no longer know. (Ek, 89)

Ionesco like Beckett has tried to “to create chaos of self awareness in his viewer and reader which can help him out come up with solutions for his existential problems” (Rahimipour, 2013) On the line of getting ready to face death and enable the king to get enough courage for such end, they try to provide an identity of his past. All the past to the king has turned to an illusion to a smashed dream of reality he himself does not strongly believe. All existence to him has turned to a kind of mirage which is alluring, disappointing, and uncertain. This idea is enhanced by other characters' leaving the stage. Juliet asserts that: “We are here beside you, we'll stay with you,” but she leaves him thereafter. Doctor who was here to cure him complements this dilemma that: “Forgive me, your majesty, I must go. I'm afraid I have to go” (Ek, 87). The only character who acted as the superego of his personality, Marguerite, proves to be more loyal to his encounter with the harrowing nature of death. In these last moments of his life, she tries to introduce the sweet nature of death in order to motivate him and help himself get ready for it. As Scott has also referred to at the end of the play Beregner's “fear of death is conquered by facing it and the king is able to preserve his dignity" (Modern Dramatist). Such a transition towards death and getting rid of the idea of immortality of human being is a kind of salvation its achievement is not accessible to all humanity specifically modern man and remains an obsession with which should be devoted much energy and attention on the line of its clarification.

CONCLUSION

One thing which on the whole can be cajoled from the Beregner's futile effort on the line of attaining immortality signifies human being's failure in understanding the mortality and the limitation of his being though he has proved to be the mighty creature on the globe. It signifies the plight of all modern men. When they come to realize this reality, to them it seems that “the world has lost its central explanation and meaning” (Esslin, 2004) and they find themselves at the mercy of nonentity and absurdity. Although these thinking creatures through technology has captured the space and other planets, ruled the world for so long like the long ruling years of Berenger, in the end, they have to live the world reluctantly and unconsciously. It may have originated from the existential school of thought of Ionesco’s time which highlighted that people were born in this life without any hope of salvation and redemption. From this viewpoint, human being just passes this period without the awareness of what exactly is happening and why everything ends without his permission and manipulation of the issues. Just like “the death of God” view, to the people of his time the whole universe has come into existence without any trace of transcendence or the like; hence, he finds himself detached and dislocated in a hostile world upon which he has no control. Berenger in this play though once a mighty king turns out to be the sheer dominated creature of his time. In this way, Ionesco’s theatre “returns to the more classical model of tragedy within the rhetoric of the absurd” (Radulescu, 2005).

It signifies the absurdity of their being which has been afflicted under such views. This is what as Bishop (1988) has asserted that Ionesco has tried to reveal to “the observer the irrational element of his or her own existence” (1010-11). In this way Ionesco has tried to reflect the true character of the time and the era which there is a general tendency not to be exposed to the public. He has tried to mirror the reality in any way possible to create a
new image of reality which would help the reader out to get to a better view of his own being. The creation of characters like Marguerite is an attempt on this line. Time and again, she has tried to bring back the king to the reality which demands on his view of life and being, but it has not proved promising as far as the King has been obsessed with the idea immortality.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The field of drama has called for great research and attention. Diverse types of researches have dealt with the various genres and themes. The researcher has specifically worked on dramatic literature and more specifically 20\textsuperscript{th} century dramatic literature.

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