

Ego Death: The Loss of ‘Subjective Self-identity’ in Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*

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Abstract

In Jungian Psychology, Ego death is known as psychic death. It simply means that the person improves his/her past life and makes radical changes in it as if he was born again; he goes from one stage to another to start life anew. This transformation of the psych is crucial for human beings to rebuild their lives if the ego death is positive. In this case, mind will become a tabula rasa and the persons can design a beautiful future on it. Unfortunately, the metamorphosis or the ego death in Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* is mostly negative. The characters, except Berenger, become rhinoceroses; they lose their subjective identity one after another. Their change is not to return to their pure origin as human beings but to become a dangerous beast. The characters know the conversion is epidemic; yet they do not resist it. On the contrary, they go out and some of them happily receive it, like Daisy. They admire their new form and are happy with it as if being an animal was better than being a man in the current status. This study shows that humanity is in danger and also clarifies that human beings are fed up with being humans. They take new forms and risk man values and features hoping that they can find a meaning for their lives, but they fail. Almost all the characters, cattle-like, follow the bad norm, but Berenger refuses to surrender and embrace the transformation since he believes that it is better to change the essence not the form. He saves his self-identity while others are losing theirs, though it is very hard.

Keywords: ego, ego death, negative ego death, positive ego death, cattle-like

Introduction

In the modern era, not only writers and thinkers, but even common people want to make some changes in their lives because they believe that the world wars, the political systems and the ideological conflicts have made life difficult and stripped man of all types of ethics and values. Losing the right path and missing the true purpose of life made man disappointed; therefore, they should either end the chaos by committing suicide or they should make some fundamental changes to restore the true meaning and aims of life which can be done through positive ego death. According to Ventegodt and Merrick, the Jungian term psychic death is a synonym for ego death and they say “in order to radically improve global quality of life, it seems necessary to have a fundamental transformation of the psyche. Such a shift in personality has been labeled an “ego death” in Buddhism or a psychic death by Jung, because it implies a shift back to the existential position of the natural self, i.e., living the true purpose of life” (1021).

Many people ask themselves questions such as: Who am I? Why am I here? Such questions are raised by ego, the consciousness of self-identity, when man gets lost and does not recognize himself and the people around him. This feeling emerges when he observes the deeds of man including wars, massacres, terrorist attacks, persecutions, and torture, curbing free voices and increasing the number of the prisons and ignoring health and education cares, especially in the countries ruled by totalitarian systems. Modern man lives in crisis; therefore, he welcomes any change and is ready to embrace new experiments hoping that the metamorphosis will rescue them from their dogmatic status as it happens to the characters in *Rhinoceros*, though they are not certain about the consequences.

Self-Identity

Self-identity is what you know about your distinctive identity, who you are and who you want to be. Identity is a definition placed on the self. Your sense of identity refers to your knowledge of who you are. Identity always answers the question, “Who are you?” (Baumeister, 248) The terms personal identity and self-identity can be traced to ancient Greece and are at the heart of the basic philosophical question: Who am I? Both terms explore what it means to be human, their broad nature allowing them to be engaged through a variety of perspectives that include psychological, philosophical, psychosocial, and narrative. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, Cedric Oliver Evans differentiates the terms by referring to personal identity as the identity of persons other than ourselves and self-identity as being aware of one's own identity (Jackson and Hogg, 545). Self-identity is not only the present status of persons; it also includes past selves and future selves.

At the beginning of the play, all the characters (Jean, Dudard, Daisy, Papillon ...etc.) seem to be very normal both psychologically and socially. The only one who is criticized of being indifferent and drunkard is Berenger. In his argument with Jean in Act One, he utters several things which prove that this man has problems with himself and with the society as he says, “I feel out of place in life, among people, and so I take to drink” (Ionesco, 17). Jean, Berenger's close friend, describes this situation as self-loss and utters, “You try to escape from yourself!” (Act One, P. 17) Berenger does not deny this and replies [I'm so tired....]. He is confused and this condition is the outcome of viewing things and the surrounding world realistically.

Berenger knows exactly who he is and is aware of his self-identity. This man does not drink for fun, but to remember himself. In Act One, he says, “I can’t seem to get used to myself. I don’t even know if I am me. Then as soon as I take a drink, the lead slips away and I recognize myself, I become me again” (P. 18). There is no logic in this statement, but at least he knows what he needs and how to be himself, but when Jean says that he is strong because he is naturally strong, he has moral strength and he is not riddled with alcohol. Later on this proves to be wrong because he cannot resist and turns into a rhinoceros. Berenger knows that spending his time alone and drinking too much is inappropriate and thus he promises to change, but not to a rhino of course, but to an educated man. Jean advises and encourages Berenger to build his self-identity and be social, but the one who loses his self-identity is Jean himself and other characters because they really do not know their true nature and abilities. Berenger’s indirect statement obviously clarifies that Jean also needs to change his behaviors. Berenger confesses his weakness and mistakes, but Jean no.

“BERENGER: He can’t stand being contradicted. The slightest disagreement makes him fume”.
(Ionesco, P. 33)

The characters transform into rhinos one by one; some of them unconsciously like Mr. Boeuf, the Logician and Jean, some consciously like Mrs. Boeuf and some others like Daisy willingly. Mrs. Boeuf decides to join her husband and accepts the metamorphosis and Daisy is uncertain about how to cope with the situation and believes that she cannot stay alone; therefore, she leaves the room in the final scene only to join the rhinos. Berenger lives in the same situation, but he decides to find coping mechanisms. He prefers to remain a human rather than to transform. Bloom writes, “Poor Berenger is certainly a flawed hero: weak, confused, fearful, alcoholic. Yet he will not yield. No one can win the war against our rhinoceroses, and Berenger doubtless will be gored, but he will die human” (248). In the final lines of the play he emphatically states, “I’m the last man left, and I’m staying that way until the end. I’m not capitulating” (Ionesco, P. 107). This enthusiasm is not seen in other characters. On the contrary, no resistance can be detected from their side.

In Act Two, Scene Two, Jean at first refuses that he is transforming “I’m sound in mind and limb” (P.60), but later he says that he does not trust doctors, and he only has confidence in “veterinary surgeons” (P.62). Regarding Daisy, the situation is worse. She admires the rhinos and believes that they are perfect flocks and better than the human beings. Though Berenger discloses his love for her and begs her to stay with him, she prefers being a rhinoceros not remain a human. Dudard also gives up his identity as human being easily and his utterance obviously supports this as he says, “I don’t feel very hungry-or rather, to be frank, I don’t like tinned food very much. I feel like eating outside on the grass” (Ionesco, P. 92).

Positive Ego Death vs. Negative Ego Death

The characters’ metamorphoses are the focal point in Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*. Losing your identity as a human being and embracing animality is absurd, but they accept it because their existence in such terrible condition, human life, is more absurd. Abbotson (2003: 2) states:

‘Feeling that the absurdity of modern existence cannot be communicated intellectually, Ionesco makes his audience sense and feel it through the experience of a play that mocks those who believe in causality, and exposes the meaninglessness and irrationality of people’s lives and relationships in its presentation of characters whose inability to communicate leads them to dehumanize themselves and others’.

People in the 20th century were alarmed by the explosion of systems or regimes including totalitarianism, communism, fascism, nationalism and so on. People were confused; they believed that they had to form alliance with one party just like the characters who transform into pachyderm, even if it costs their self-identity as a human being. The characters realize that alteration is necessary to get rid of the dogmatic situation, and the conversion in this drama will occur through ego-death, self-surrender and transition. When human beings get to the conclusion that their existence is meaningless, then they have to either commit suicide or to make some drastic changes in their lives. They choose the latter, metamorphosis.

The first attempt of transformation is initiated by Berenger. In his conversation with Jean, he utters, “Solitude seems to oppress me. And so does the company of other people” (Ionesco, P. 19). This self-contradiction proves that he is mentally confused, not in the sense that he is insane, but because he cannot attach any meaning to his life. Jean’s, his friend, criticism awakens him from the dream and brings him back to consciousness. For a man who has doubt if he exists or not “I sometimes wonder if I exist myself” (ibid.), finding himself and rebuilding his self-identity will not be easy. He can do that only if he can think as Jean tells him, “You don’t exist, my dear Berenger, because you don’t think. Start thinking, then you will” (ibid). Jean also realizes that catching the right path to construct your individuality is difficult, and says, “Life is a struggle, it’s cowardly not to put up a fight” (ibid., 20)

Beside all the difficulties, self-confidence and the desire of individuation support Berenger to transform from an aimless and alcoholic person to a man who carries on his shoulders the task of saving humanity. Berenger cannot endure Jean’s constant criticism and humiliation and hiding from his friend Daisy whom he loves, but secretly. He believes that the only way to get back his status as a normal human being and to disclose his love to Daisy is to change to a better man which is called positive ego-death. In two different utterances, he opens his heart and mind to transition, “I make myself a solemn promise, I’ll keep my word to myself”, “Instead of drinking, I’ll develop my mind. I feel better already. My head already feels clearer” (Ionesco, P. 23-24)

The promise is made at the beginning of the Play and the audience obviously witnesses the consequences of this change at the end when Berenger makes up his mind [.....I’ll put up a fight against the lot of them, the whole lot of them! I’m the last man left, and I’m staying that way until the end. I’m not capitulating!] (Ionesco, P. 107) to remain human and a good human who decisively rejects to join the herd of the rhinoceros as Daisy and others did.

Berenger concludes that human beings should change their thoughts and behaviors to revert to their origin and bring to light the aims and meanings of their lives. This is the positive self-loss

when you kill fear, weakness and doubt in your heart and create a strong man out of the scattered pieces of your broken personality. Finally, he discovers that man has follies and their actions may be offensive and disagreeable; yet they are superior and more beautiful than animals. He says, “A man’s not ugly to look at, not ugly at all” (Ionesco, P. 106). By standing alone to face the problems of losing identity as a human being, Berenger becomes a hero.

Leech (1969:36) asserts:

‘In the drama, as for a long time in the novel, we now have ordinary men as heroes, for almost all the extraordinary men live in private life and are therefore in that sense ordinary. They may, none the less, when brought to the stage or the pages of a novel, stay more firmly in our minds than men in apparently more prominent places’.

Though he may not be able to save human race, especially when he is alone and cannot find a human company around him, he becomes the symbol of resistance against something which he does not want or against losing his identity as a human being.

Another side of the story of metamorphosis in the Play is negative ego-death, loss of personal identity. The characters are stereotypes of the European or, at a broad level, the world population who have lost trust themselves and in human species, or at least a human being in the current form; therefore, they seek transformation. Baumeister writes, “The concept of self is not really changing; rather, different parts of it are coming to light. What is changing, then, is that part of the self-concept that happens to be present on one’s mind at a given moment” (252). The transformation starts with changing the voice, colour and form of the skin, and growing a horn on the forehead. These symptoms are signs of transition, but what actually the characters need is inward, rather than outward, metamorphosis as Jean utters, [...We’ve got to build our life on new foundations. We must get back to primeval integrit] (Ionesco, P. 67), but unfortunately he cannot put his words into actions.

Jean states this at a time when some rhinoceral features appear on him. The pronoun “we” refers to people in general and that’s what exactly they need; to build life anew and bringing back humanism; restore human values, justice and equality. This is the core of ego-death; going back to the origin to found a life with no mistakes and shortcomings. If Jean or other characters could do that, then they would have achieved a positive ego-death, but unfortunately they lose their identity as a human being and it is forever as Daisy says, “They won’t get over it. It’s for good” (Ionesco, P. 101). Abbotson argues, “When people refuse to think for themselves, they can no longer be themselves. This means they can become anyone, but that is tantamount to being no one” (5). Accordingly, the characters lose their essence rather than discovering the meaning of their lives and restoring the lost values.

Ego death is a psychological condition which happens in the life of those who realize that they have lost the real purpose of their existence and those who cannot attach any meanings to their lives.

Coming to this conclusion, the individuals feel that they terribly need to change their current status hoping that they can rebuild their life from the very beginning. In such cases, the persona will organize his deeds and he will have a clear understanding for his life and the universe, and this change is called positive ego-death. But the Ego death is regarded as negative if the individuals get fed up with their present condition and thus they will try to change it to healthier, but they will fail and the transition will not provide them with a better life or identity. They will take a new identity, but it is worse than their former one as it happens in this play; the characters are human beings, but they become rhinos as a result of the ego death. Even if the characters are happy and satisfied with the shift, it does not mean that being an animal is better than being a man as Daisy thinks, “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 right to do what they did” (Ionesco, P103). Daisy’s utterance is her personal opinion and thus it is totally rejected by Berenger. Though the majority turns into pachyderms, it does not mean that the metamorphosis is positive. This is Ionesco’s message to people indicating that if many people follow a party or an ideology, it does not necessarily mean it is good or even better than others.

Before the transformation, the characters have their personal or private identities; they have jobs, they are called by their names or surnames. They have weaknesses and defects, for instance, Jean blames Berenger for drinking but he himself goes out with friends to drink, Mr. Papillon threatens to dismiss Mr. Boeuf for being absent from work without release or a justification, but he also becomes a rhino and does not come back though he orders the staff of the journal to be present tomorrow morning; people listen to the Logician and ask his advice to solve the problems, but he cannot resist his alteration and save his identity as a wise man. Besides, they were still themselves. Abbotson (2003:5) writes, “Their inability to know for sure who they are and what their relationship might be is tragic”. It is really a catastrophe when people believe that changing their outer appearance will give them new ids. They are the same folk, but Daisy says, “They’re like gods” (Ionesco, P. 104).

The characters in their new forms lack all positive attributes; they run over a cat, destroy the buildings and ruin all the service units in the city; yet, the danger of the negative self-loss becomes much greater when one happily embraces the metamorphosis and believes that they should not save human race. Instead, they should join the herd of the rhinoceroses and forget all about love and marriage. Berenger expresses his love to Daisy and begs her to get married and save human race as Adam and Eve did before through giving birth to children, but Daisy disagrees and makes fun of him saying, “I feel a bit ashamed of what you call love-this morbid feeling, this male weakness. And female too” (Ionesco, P. 103) Abbotson describes this situation stating “unable to truly communicate, people become condemned to isolation; assertions of love and marriage are as empty as their linguistic attempts to connect” (5). Abbotson’s view reinforces the notion that what happens to the characters, except Berenger, in *Rhinoceros* is the absolute negative Ego death because they lose and reject all the characteristics of human beings such as love, passions, emotions, communications and even their conducts become barbaric.

Conclusions

Ego death is a psychological condition in which the characters feel the absurdity of their lives and the earnest need to change, so that they can free themselves from the unpleasant experiences and establish their future on a solid background. It can be divided into two types: positive ego-death and negative ego-death. Both types are witnessed in *Rhinoceros*. Thus the characters can be divided upon two opposite sides. The first side consists of only one character, Berenger, and the rest of the other characters are on the other side. The transformation which happens to Berenger is positive while other characters' metamorphoses are negative.

Berenger's transition is positive because he soon discovers his mistakes (in Act One) and he is ready to confess his faults such as visiting his friend Jean to ask for forgiveness after they had a severe argument between them. He also promises himself and his friend to educate himself and quit drinking. The transformation does not occur only in his behaviors, but his psychological condition will also change. From an alcoholic man who even has doubt if he exists, he becomes a savior of humanism and a resolute individual who stands against those who easily surrender to epidemic diseases of the so-called totalitarianism of the 20th century.

Opposite to Berenger's positive transition, the rest of the characters lose their self-identity in a negative way. They cannot restore their lost life and they cannot find any meanings to their lives. What they get is only some superficial changes which is somehow similar to wearing a mask to hide themselves from their real self or simply to deceive themselves because real transformation should start from the root. Berenger listens to everybody attentively and scrutinizes the communications and then absorbs what is good for him. Now he is a man who encourages others to be strong and to have faith in their superiority over rhinos and even he is obliged to slap his beloved Daisy only to get her back to her consciousness. Unfortunately, the rest of the characters kill humanity in their hearts thinking that being a vigorous pachyderm is much better than remaining a weak man, and thus the ego-death for them is negative.

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