

# Eugene Ionesco and the Power of Grotesque Realism: A Bakhtian Study of *Victims of Duty*

Anum Mirza

Ph.D. Scholar, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India  
E-mail: mirza.anum123@gmail.com

---

**Abstract**—Ionesco was a Romanian-French dramatist and one of the first figures of the French Avant-garde theater. He composed generally in French and beyond mocking the dullest and worn-out circumstances, Ionesco's works portray the inconsequentiality and the isolation of human lives in the most substantial manner. The modern American writers like Thomas Pynchon, Ken Kesey, Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller utilize the devices of parody to beat the torment of preposterousness. Mikhail Bakhtin affirmed that hilarity and amusement is man's single protection against silliness and ludicrousness of life. Ionesco felt that in an absurd play there are no protagonists however a character is introduced as a lost person, disconnected from his religious ceremonies and underlying foundations. All his activities appear to be silly and futile and his whole battle finishes despondently. In this paper the speculations of Bakhtin are connected to explore and investigate the importance of hilarity and the importance of grotesque realism utilized by Ionesco in his play *Victims of Duty*. The play *Victims of Duty* of Eugene Ionesco is investigated through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of grotesque realism and it is an unconventional and original study done from the new perspective and viewpoint. The only method to get away from the ache of illogicality and meaninglessness of life is to laugh and express amusement at them instead of crying about surroundings and everything.

**Keywords:** Grotesque, absurdity, parody, satire, illogicality, amusement.

Ionesco had encountered craziness and uneasiness of life; so he engaged in recreations in light of the fact that act and the theatre in a sense lightens nervousness by giving opportunity of articulation. He used grotesque, parody, carnival and satire to depict his characters and the terrible world. He spent large portion of his adolescence in France and while being there, had an encounter he guaranteed influenced his view of the world more altogether than anything else. Deborah B. Gaensbauer depicts in *Eugène Ionesco Revisited*, "Walking in summer sunshine in a white-washed provincial village under an intense blue sky, [Ionesco] was profoundly altered by the light." He was hit in all respects abruptly with a sentiment of

extraordinary iridescence, the sentiment of gliding off the land and an irresistible sentiment of prosperity and comfort. When he "glided" back to the land and the luminosity left him, he saw and realized that the veracity of life was loaded with debasement, rot and recurring futile activities.

Twisting of conventional language is a vital component of Ionesco's plays. The conventional writers like G.B. Shaw and John Galsworthy portrayed the interests and they utilized a language which was not at all confounding and troubling, but rather very simple and straightforward. Whereas, Eugene Ionesco doesn't utilize or employ any sort of plain and normal language; his characters deconstruct and mutilate words communicating their mental infirmities. Satire and Puppetry of the conventional reasonable dramatization is the obvious component of Ionesco's theatre. Ruby Cohen observes that "Comedy is one of Ionesco's most effective tools for creating a freshness of vision" (*Currents in Contemporary Drama*, 31). In the modern European plays comic components have turned out to be the mainstream and the pattern to join beauty and terror has expanded. The cutting edge writers for example, Ionesco, Genet and Beckett check out utilizing the instruments of grotesque and bizarre authenticity in the plays. Bakhtin said in *Rabelais and His World* that the function of mask is very vital in the grotesque literature. He remarks thus: "The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation" (39). Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Joyce's *Ulysses* reflects one of a kind inclination in sensationalizing abnormal and grotesque realism. Following the First and Second World Wars the authors have utilized elaborate minor departure from the world as bizarre and grotesque to underline their subjects and themes and this has achieved the development of the "Theater of the Absurd" throughout Europe.

Ionesco pursued the sensational hypotheses put forward by Mikhail Bakhtin, in his *Rabelais* and Dostoevsky and responded against the conventional plays of the European playwrights. The play *Victims of Duty* performs silly

buffoonery of the heroes. All the significant characters like Madeleine, Choubert and the Detective engage in recreation and amusements and these components inserts more enthusiasm in the play. The amusements start with the landing of the Police Chief who mediates and get involved in their personal life. Ionesco employed the instruments of grotesque, farce and the method of mask and cover in the plot. The plot of the play is stacked with spoonerisms, quips, mistaken assumptions and incalculable illogical jokes. Ionesco entitled this play as a pseudo-drama managing the dreadful encounters of Choubert who is the primary hero of the play. Choubert expresses his pessimism by saying: "Nothing ever happens. A few comets and a cosmic disturbance somewhere in the universe" (Eugene Ionesco, *Victims of Duty* (118).

In Ionesco's *Victims of Duty*, the main protagonist Choubert is made to stand up and face the brutal cosmos which has lost its motivation and reason. At the point when the blind ascents the primary character Choubert talks about theatre with his spouse namely Madeleine. Shortly their family is hindered by the startling entry of one another character namely Detective who is in duty to assemble data about the earlier resident, Mallot. Now the Detective likewise joins the couple in the discourse about theater. Choubert started feeling uncomfortable with Detective who starts his cross examination about Mallot. Choubert gets befuddled and so his shoes and tie are taken off to make him relaxed and calm. Choubert states his feel of liberation: "It's much easier to breathe and I feel free in my movements" (124). Madeleine fills the phase with innumerable espresso cups, which is grotesque while her significant other Choubert is being tormented by the Detective. In any case, each endeavor at finding the self inside things only fizzles. The rounds of death proceed until the drama achieves its climactic minute of dissatisfaction, disappointment and acknowledgment. His voyage starts through his memory with the assistance of his spouse. The Detective utilizes every single imaginable strategy to hone the memory of Choubert.

The grotesque scene takes place when the Detective offers him decayed and old bread just to fix his memory, which is thoroughly and altogether grotesque. Bakhtin is well-known for his theory of grotesque realism where the body and its functions have been given new shapes just to add hilarity and amusement. But these bizarre and grotesque conditions are significant enough as these present facts and the reality of life. Ionesco provides the historical backdrop of Choubert's voyage into hellfire and his inevitable attention to the foolishness of life and the deterioration of the world. The Detective propels Choubert to look for Mallot truly. He guides and aides him to complete the adventure. Also, Madeleine admonishes him to go further and further down to achieve the base in order to look for Mallot. But Choubert tells her that "It must be dark down there; won't be able to see anything" (128). At times, Madeleine too was worried about Choubert so she expressed her nervousness and concern in the following lines as "Not far enough, darling, not far enough!" (128). "Oh! Poor darling!

I'm frightened for him. I shall never hear it again, that voice I love so well!..." (133).

The *Victims of Duty* by Eugene Ionesco is organized around silly buffoonery of the protagonists. The plot of the play is centered around the contention between Choubert and the Detective. The motivation behind Ionesco's *Victims of Duty* and its characters' works day in personality is to investigate not sensational structure, yet ontological inquiries of quintessence creation. The drama turns into a dream allegory and fantasy as Ionesco puts supreme confidence in the role and capacity of dreams. Dream components are utilized as apparatuses to investigate a definitive certainties of human presence.

Choubert imagines that his mission and search will invigorate driving him to mindfulness and illumination yet the inverse occurs for his situation. Choubert says: "the light is dark...the stars are dim...I'm suffering from an unknown disease..." (141). He is tossed into a shocking base where he endures anguish and mental disturbance. His voyage to the descending pit drives him to isolation and melancholy. The fierce cross examination of the Detective was an immense difficult situation for Choubert. The pundits see that his plunge to hellfire is an image of otherworldly and legendary voyage of the antiquated saints. Ionesco once said: "When man is cut off from his religious or metaphysical roots, he is lost, all his struggles become senseless, futile and oppressive (*Notes and Counter Notes* 257). Madeleine is ill and communicates her Freudian wish to die and end it all: Kill myself. Ionesco by utilizing the devices of humor and parody provides the lighthearted and humorous element to the people, a sort of comic relief.

Eugene Ionesco has faith in various pretends which is a critical comic procedure utilized by him in most of his plays. The difference in identities heightens and increases the enthusiasm for the people. All the games within the play become intriguing on the grounds that there was enough anticipation in each amusement. Choubert is stressed over the loss of his personality, beauty and innocence in his dream. He also expresses his wish for his spouse to grow beautiful and young once again:

Nobody had died and you'd never shed a tear...Where were all the others? In their graves, by the roadside. I want our happiness back again, we've been robbed and despoiled...Madeline, you must believe me, I swear it wasn't I who made you old! No...(130).

Ionesco utilizes the component of fantasy in order to investigate the internal and hidden identities of the heroes. He clearly demonstrated some sort of enthusiasm for Jungian and Freudian techniques of psychoanalysis. He learnt that man sinks into the emptiness and nothingness of his life. The adventure of Choubert presents to him another cognizance and familiarity with the purposelessness of life and the truth of emptiness in which every other man in this world is cling to

live and endure. The sentiments of suffering overwhelm him and towards the ending of the play he fall down in extreme anxiety like a weak and feeble creature. Choubert cries: "I'm stifling. Roasting" (147), "I can't lift my knees again!" (147). The plot of the play alludes to critical subjects of Ionesco managing life and the existential ludicrousness of current man compromised by various atomic wars and etc. Richard Coe sees that Eugene Ionesco like Bakhtin and Cervantes is an ace of comic art. Eugene Ionesco was affected by the various philosophical and theoretical works of Bergson and James when he composed his crazy dramas in impersonation of Beckett, Artaud and Proust. Ionesco trusts that the inside being and existence of a human being is rich and loaded, yet basically obscure. Eugene Ionesco said in *Fragments of a Journal* that, "I felt myself becoming heavy again, thick, leaden, a thing of lead that can be eaten away by the void" (69).

To finish up, the play *Victims of Duty* is the fresh examination in the preposterous theater. Ionesco acquaints fresh techniques and devices to portray the torment and suffering of the current man harrowed with the mental infirmities for example, hypochondria; sentimentality; misery and isolation. The mission and search of Choubert end up in depression on the grounds that the hero is the victim of his internal shortcomings of psyche. The play ends with Choubert, and Madeline forcing each other to eat the stale bread: Chew! Swallow!" (157), which is grotesque again.

## References

- [1] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Hélène Isevol'sky. Indiana UP, 1984.
- [2] Cohn, Ruby. *Currents in Contemporary Drama*. Indiana Univ. Press, 1969.
- [3] Ionesco, Eugène. *Notes and Counter Notes*. New York: Grove, 1964.
- [4] Ionesco, Eugène. *Amédée; The New Tenant; Victims of Duty*. Grove, 1988.
- [5] Ionesco, Eugène. *Fragments of a Journal*. Trans. Jean Stewart. London: Faber and Faber, 1968.
- [6] Gaensbauer, Deborah B. *Eugène Ionesco Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996.