

Unveiling the Garb of Normalcy: Albert Camus *The Plague* vs COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper has been to explore the significance of Camus' philosophy of the Absurd during pandemics. In Camus' 1947 classic *The Plague*, he continuously discusses pandemics as the absurd in the world and man's reactions to it in the light of a plague that affected the city of Oran. This absurdity is discussed in the light of the ongoing COVID-19 contagion. Symbolism of the novel and the moral lessons it can offer us in this moment of sickness and racial unrest is dealt with. The coronavirus pandemic, as awful as it is, highlights a permanent truth about our vulnerabilities and our mutual independence. Uncertainties become the only reality within a pandemic and how existentialist thought prevails through within literature can be examined with a detailed introspection.

#covid19 #albertcamus #theplague #pandemic

Pandemics reverberate life altering and irremediable changes in terms of the lives of humans undergoing a crucial and extensive upheaval. People face changing realities, distorted realizations, cardinal shifts in paradigms of realities during a cataclysmic tribulation such as pandemic. Upon cognitive rumination of the literature representing pandemics in the past, we observe profound similarity in the distraught situation. The study of epidemics helps us understand politics, socio-economic structures and personal relationships. From the earliest times to the present, epidemics have affected human history in myriad ways: demographically, culturally, politically, financially and biologically. What marks the literature of plague, pestilence and pandemic is a commitment to try and forget if not some sense of explanation, then at least a sense of meaning out of the raw experience of panic, horror and despair. Narrative is an attempt to stave off meaninglessness, and in the void of the pandemic, literature serves the purpose of trying to, however desperately, to stop the bleeding.

Uncertainties become the only reality within a pandemic and how existentialist thought prevails through within literature can be examined with a detailed introspection. The existential delirium is captured in various forms of literature, where the very existence becomes the source of pain arousing from the depravity of hope and an enquiry into the unending trauma caused by the invisible force of nature eating through the interwoven texture of humanity. Published in the aftermath of the Second World War, *The Plague* – or *La Peste* – has typically been read as an allegory for fascism. But now the story strikes us in a more literal light: the infectious disease no longer represents the Nazi occupation of France, as it did for many of its first readers, but simply another infectious disease – Covid-19. And we are all, the chorus goes, residents of Camus's Oran.

The epidemic is a recurring theme with a long tradition in literary history of which Albert Camus *The Plague* is probably twentieth century's best-known example. *The Plague* is a fundamental point of reference for any analysis of this literary motif in contemporary writing. Camus' narrator chronicles the spread of a plague that attacks the city of Oran and the community's resistance against their evil. The fascist 'plague' that inspired the novel may have gone, but fifty-five years after Camus' death, many other varieties of pestilence keep this book urgently relevant. *The Plague* has enjoyed a deserved revival in the time of the coronavirus.

A year into the pandemic of COVID-19 coronavirus disease, the global effort to develop and distribute an effective vaccine has already produced several promising options. But the question is have we really developed a practical and rational psychological reaction to the pandemic? In his classic of 1947, *The Plague*, Camus referring to the classical 'black death' or bubonic plague, aptly mentions that "pestilences" keep repeating themselves, but the world still reacts to them with surprise. The inevitability of human sufferings through illness often comes as a sudden realization provoking fear and panic among the masses.

Considered to be one of the greatest of its times, *The Plague* back in those days sets the human behavioural pattern at times of a pandemic. It mentions that habits tend to get lost initially and they start returning when the infection ceases. The intense 'fear of end' while knowing the very obvious has been the basis of human absurdity during the time of pandemics. Existentialism further proposes this absurdity to rise out of the conflict between constant search for meaning in life versus the apparent 'nothingness' of the universe. Like reaction to grief, the reaction to such a biological disaster is also individualized, leading to various forms of

denial, anger, frustration, dissociation, somatization and sublimation. This thesis will glance at ‘social absurdity’ that the world faces drawing parallels with a classic drafted year back about a fictional illness that plagued the world.

In fact, the altruistic records mentioned in the Decameron written about the times of bubonic plague have later been interpreted as healthier forms of defence during such “pestilences” (Marafioti 71). While it can be argued that Camus might have drafted *The Plague* through the screens of colonialism, as a rebellious attempt against the prevalent political ideologies of those times: several aspects of the ‘social distancing’, the vulnerabilities of the health care workers, the plight of the population and the prevalent chaos, all seem to resonate with the current situation. Globally indeed we are ‘plagued and sapped’ as the people of the town in the novel. Zooming out of the philosophical underpinnings the threat is indeed true. We do have an illness that has affected the whole of the world! Stress is but the norm of the times of pandemics but the world has an exaggerated response of ‘mass-hysteria’, fear of uncertainty and isolation as billions are locked down in an attempt to contain the outbreak. This is the ‘storm of absurdity’ which COVID-19 has taken the world into.

In *The Plague* Camus wisely draws similar connotations saying that knowledge, beliefs and memories are the true offshoots that one wins after the war between plague and life is fought. The obvious chaos attempts to stabilize the society. While the human civilization is scattered and isolated due to the virus, many rare species of birds and animals are again seen to surface, plants living longer and air becoming clearer. In that perspective, *The Plague* is not a tale of despair, but that of rejuvenation and lessons learnt for redemption through the obvious sufferings.

Camus’ *The Plague* may also be viewed as our vulnerability to random extermination by any means. Or as philosopher Alain De Botton writes in an excerpt in The New York Times on March 19,2020: “Plague or no plague, there is always, as it were, the plague, if what we mean by that is a susceptibility to sudden death, an event that can render our lives instantaneously meaningless”. Camus and similar philosophers believed the Absurd arises out of the conflict between our search for meaning and the apparent random nature and meaninglessness of the universe. What is produced by the conflict will depend on the individual, but may include various forms of denial, dissociation, and sublimation.

As the world battles COVID-19, Camus’ writing offers valuable insights into how one may approach the idea of disease. Thinking clearly about the arbitrary killer in the midst may enable us to act better against it. Pestilences are very common. But we find it hard to believe in a pestilence when it descends upon us. Denial is a common reaction to disease. At the heart of this denial is fear because the idea of normalcy is inimical to disease. Normalcy presumes freedom, and that is precisely what is lacking in times of an epidemic. After all, disease is an abstraction. The contagion that affected us discards without discrimination or schedule each person is similarly condemned. To truly acknowledge the idea of disease is to abandon the plans and presumptions that have governed one’s life so far. It is to acknowledge that the future and the past don’t exist any longer; all that remains is what lies in the present. And here lies the strength of disease: it condemns one to live in the present. Without the warm glow of the past or the glittery promise of the future, one is resigned to march to the dull drumbeat of the present, making way from day to day, exhausted but unwilling to succumb. In times like this, one prefers denial because it allows for hope.

No other global crisis has impacted humanity, blurred the established distinction of rich and poor, super-power and third world, science and non-science, religion and non-religion as decisively as the crisis emanating from coronavirus has accomplished. Albert Camus was able to depict the existential absurdity in his *The Plague*. As the disease ravages the town of Oran in French Algeria, there is an element of abstraction with a realistic portrayal of life’s existential struggles. Isolated by sand and sea, inhabitants of Oran look in vain to societal institutions- government, religion and medicine- in their struggle to survive an epidemic relentlessly raising its death tolls daily. In this context, Camus’ absurdism becomes significant.

A virus intimidated the scientific minds of the twenty-first century to such helplessness that the modern world’s nation after nation, city after city, village after village have to be shut down with only remedial mantra: ‘stay home’. Even the world superpowers are left helpless as the novel coronavirus has the ability to unleash bloodless death, almost noiselessly, with such sophistication that even doctors fear to grapple with. Human history has been a story about how human beings have conquered nature and overpowers them. In this endless two-way struggle, it is now apparent that nature holds the advantage, and it will dictate terms when humanity will enter a new world after the virus is dealt with definitively. And people of all faiths, believers of all forms of scientism have begun to realise that there is more to faith and more to science to ensure a healthy life on this planet.

The Plague unfolds in Oran, an Algerian city under French rule where we witness a group of volunteers, including Dr. Bernard Rieux, Jean Tarrou, and Father Paneloux, a Catholic priest, choose to provide health care to plague victims at the risk of contracting the virus. Just as the solidarity of the COVID-19 volunteers symbolises the resistance against the pandemic in the face of meaninglessness especially during the outbreak of the contagion, the solidarity of the volunteers in *The Plague* symbolises the French resistance during World War II. It enlisted people of diverse stripes—liberals and conservatives, socialists and capitalists,

believers and nonbelievers, and more. Hence, Camus's humanistic ideals and sensibilities are omnipresent in the novel.

The Plague proves that illness, exile and separation are the characteristics of pandemics. Many of us, having first-hand experience of the COVID-19 pandemic can reflect upon these characteristics very well. The pain of loneliness that the world went through especially during the initial stages of the outbreak was exceptional. Camus' description of the plague is vivid and heartfelt. It is indicative of his own depth of feeling that the narrator remarks early in the story that "the first thing that the plague brought to our fellow-citizens was exile" (56), and that "being separated from a loved one...was the greatest agony of that long period of exile" (53). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problem of an epidemic of loneliness and separation. That is, physical distancing and stress caused by the pandemic worsen the suicide crisis across the globe.

It is clear that *The Plague* is a story about us. Our society is absurd and Camus' novel examines our relationship to the absurdity of modern existence, that is the reign of COVID-19 contagion. The novel throws light on the desolation of the human condition and man's mortality in the light of their indifferent vastness. Here absurdity is the source of values and actions. All the men gathered around the narrative represent all human response to calamity. The human population is only left with indifferences, hypocrisy and laziness during epidemics. It extends the narcissism of the times into the new era often via the forbidden hope that it will smite one's enemies while sparing oneself. A priest delivers a harangue, the newspapers hawk counterfeit remedies and the public cycles incoherently through moods: denial, dread, a growing sense of panic; sudden gusts of piety, followed by gusts of licentious abandon. Eventually the town lapses into a kind of collective despondency with one predictable exception: a privileged few, those with money to burn.

Camus discovers the indifference of the world towards contagion and the reality that man's actions in life especially in times of pandemics are basically unimportant and meaningless. Camus, though, refuses to allow the absurdities that he discovers to abate his desire to live and to create wonderful works of literature. Camus encompasses the hostilities of the world during a contagion as a cause to revolt against all the absurdities. He discovers that nature can offer man much beauty and pleasure even though nature can also be a source of the Absurd. At times in his life, even Camus is unsure if his philosophies of the Absurd and his desires to continue with his writings are correct or appropriate. Every man has doubts and periods of incertitude, and Camus is no exception; however, he survives these uncertain periods and perseveres to live each day as if the next will not arrive. This is the true spirit that is to be inculcated in days of pandemics.

Aside from his philosophy of life, Camus' keen perceptions, his abundant joy for life, and his sensitivity to the beauty of the world pervades the novel. His careful and lengthy consideration of man's worth and purpose in life prove that Camus focuses on the essential questions concerning life. As an intellectual, Camus never came to a conclusion about his view of the world. He just continued to develop his thoughts, to observe the world around him, and to remain open to all aspects of man and the world. He is a marvellous example of the conscientious individual who strives to discover and explain the mysteries of the world. Each person who searches for the answers in life discovers something profound; for Camus, the Absurd becomes profound. Camus is certain that man should find his potential in life and strive to be intellectual, always thirsting for knowledge in the face of the Absurd. He obviously concludes that man should revolt against the Absurd because Camus, himself, continues to write and find meaning in life until his ironically Absurd death.

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