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**“Impact and approach to pandemic covid-19 on various sectors”**

## **Reproaching Albert Camus’ *The Plague* in the times of novel Corona virus Pandemic**

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### **Abstract**

History is replete with incidents of pandemics like Influenza flu, Ebola, and now, the recent most novel Corona virus. The spread of these infectious beings is mostly fatal, highly explosive, and unmanageable, bringing with them severe social, economic, physiological and psychological impacts. Revisiting such historical events through literature is quite insightful. One feels empathetic and connected with the characters. This paper intends to revisit the settings and situations of Oran, the centre of pandemic in Albert Camus’ *The Plague* and compare it with the current, globally occurring, pandemic of Corona virus. The purpose is to understand how literature connects with real life and becomes a source of hope, strength and motivation for the readers.

**Keywords:** Plague, literature, corona virus, exile

### **Introduction**

Natural calamities like death and diseases have been a source of theme in many literary masterpieces since centuries ago. Reading literature dealing with these themes is a means of gaining a kind of intimacy. In the present scenario, life has got stuck somewhere between phones, laptops, power and chargers. Online tools and applications have grabbed almost all individuals. They are believed to be our best friends in the context of connectivity. And this is quite true. We have all been forced to live in the virtual world. This means is letting the life go on, but at the same time, it is creating a kind of vacuum, and each one seems to be fatigued. There is a kind of gushing of river of fastly changing culture, strong scene of politics in every part of life. Media is observing and scrutinizing each and everyone, and creating a kind of bias.

In this chaotic world reading literature is the only means of escape, and a source of restorative cure. One is taken away into the new world of characters, experiencing new kind of joys and sorrows, new ways of dealing with complex life, using logic and reason. The reader forgets about the current situation and transports into another world and place. The reader sometimes, learns through the characters’ behaviour and sense of coping with the difficulties of life, helping in shaping the society. One such subject is disease and death resulting through pandemics. Great works of literature have been written to provide an insightful and heart-rending record of events in an intimate way, which transforms lives and brings consolation in the times of crisis.

Albert Camus has been considered as a hero in France and a real thing: a genuinely independent intellectual. Publication of *The Plague* in 1947 has left Camus perennially known in the history of English literature. *The Plague* is Albert Camus’ most successful novel which was never out of print and is considered as a classic of world literature read by millions. The Mediterranean city of Oran was the setting for a famous fictional outbreak of bubonic plague in Algeria under French colonial rule. The plot of the novel *The Plague* deals with the emergence of plague, its duration, and decline. Sean Illing (2020) writes after reading this novel: Whoever you are, wherever you live, you are vulnerable, at least in

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principle. While some of us may fare better because of our age or health, the microbes themselves are impartial' (quoted in Peters).

This novel is about illness, pandemic, exile, loneliness and separation. Because of these particular reasons, it could not be exempted from discussion in this paper. Camus has an acute first-hand experience of pain and loneliness brought by the plague. The narrator of the plague states, "the first thing that the plague brought to our fellow citizens was exile" (56). And it brought separation and loneliness due to seclusion and quarantine, "being separated from a loved one ... (was) the greatest agony of that long period of exile" (53). Therefore, effects of the disease are such one has never expected for and never prepared beforehand. This is a universal saga, a story about 'us' told from third person point of view. It is about being in a situation of extremity where there are no possibilities of being good or bad, right or wrong. The possibility is of survival, and that too, only of the fittest.

Dr. Bernard Rieux is the main protagonist. The writer doesn't give any detailed account of the history of Rieux, the reader is able to know from his dealing with his wife, his servant, his patients, about him. The reader observes that he is moved by a sense of vocation; he is quite devoted to his profession; he is kind, generous, aware and an atheist. In an article in Jesuit magazine *America*, John Berry in 2014, writes that 'Camus is a secular saint' (quoted in an online article "Plague in the Age of Science"). He admires the human beings in the end of the novel. Dr Bernard Rieux, is the objective narrator of the story. He has been considered by critics as 'exemplary and inspiring'. He senses the emergence of the signs of plague and informs the authorities who apprehensively respond and neglect, resulting into infections, first occurring in numerous dying rats and then the human beings until it becomes unmanageable. Administration in Oran is, sadly, busy in deciding whether it should be termed as 'plague' or not instead of making necessary arrangements to save killing half of the town of Oran:

'Sincerely, tell me what you think: are you certain that this is plague?'

'You're asking the wrong question. It is not a matter of vocabulary, but a matter of time' (40).

But Dr Rieux was sure it was something quite enormous. While examining a patient he felt so. 'Yes, he was afraid. He knew that in this same part of town a dozen patients would be waiting for him the next day, bent double over their swollen glands' (47). He also felt 'that the measures that had been taken were insufficient' (Ibid). When in three days 'the two outbuildings turned into hospitals were full, Rieux concluded: 'The rats died of the plague or of something very similar to it,' and, 'they put tens of thousands of fleas in circulation and these will transmit the infection at an exponential rate if we do not stop it in time' (48). But like it was never to stop, 'in four days the infection took four surprising leaps: sixteen dead, then twenty four, twenty eight and thirty two. On the fourth day they announced the opening of the auxiliary hospital in an infants' school. The townspeople, who, up to this point, had continued to hide their anxiety behind jokes, seemed more depressed and less voluble in the streets' (49).

The situation and theme of this novel resonates with the current unexpectedly emerged pandemic of novel corona virus (Covid-19). It seems either the world in the novel has leaped out around the reader or the world surrounding the reader has jumped into the pages of the novel. The Covid-19 emerged in China, but its information was suppressed, and in due course of time it kept on spreading due to migration of infected people from the centre to all parts of the world. And when cases started coming up in numbers people did not believe it to be actually dangerous and fatal. It was as if history was repeating itself. Albert Camus in *The Plague* expresses a similar kind of feeling of the acceptance of the fact that it was actually happening. He writes:

Pestilence is in fact very common, but we find it hard to believe in a pestilence when it descends upon us. There have been as many plagues in the world as there have been wars, yet plagues and wars always find people equally unprepared. Dr Rieux was unprepared, as were the rest of the townspeople, and this is how one should understand his reluctance to believe. (30)

People were unprepared to believe as well as react on its occurrence. Camus further adds:

In this respect, the citizens of Oran were like the rest of the world, they thought about themselves in other words, they were humanists: they did not believe in pestilence. A Pestilence does not have human dimensions, so people tell themselves that it is unreal, that it is a bad dream which will end. But it does not always end and, from one bad dream to the next, it is people who end, humans first of all because they have not prepared themselves. (20)

Literature is a means of gaining insights into many unknown and inexperienced incidents which the reader may as well face at any time. These insights usually prove helpful and allow the reader to deal with similar situations in a smarter way. If we consider here Albert Camus' *The Plague* or any similar writing portraying the life during or after a pandemic, one may observe that this book is dealing with presenting the epidemic spread in the town of Oran in Algeria and how the inhabitants, the victims, the survivors, the medical community responded to it. This book has been considered as *Umberto Eco* means 'open work' with multiple simultaneous explanations. This novel is a means of understanding the historical background of the landscape, the people, the age, the place of Oran, a village in Algeria. Although it has occurred many years ago in Paris, yet people are not ready to accept its recurrence. They are also apprehensive about its seriousness this time. Here it is indispensable to remember the Black Death of Marseilles, the Great Plague of London, the Great Plague of Milan, which have many literary references.

So Camus believes this catastrophe to be an event in the history, which has a past and may have a future as well. These events should be taken as models and should lead to more preparedness every time. In this current situation of novel Corona virus pandemic one must take it as yet another catastrophe which has taken a good toll of population and believed to have covered a very long period of time in the history of such events.

Further, Dr Rieux, who understands the case and is very much worried about the symptoms and seriousness of the occurrence of the disease, states:

‘When a microbe’, Rieux said, after a brief silence, ‘is capable of increasing the size of the spleen four times in three days, and of making the mesenteric ganglia the size of an orange and the consistency of porridge, that is precisely when we should rush to do something. The sources of infection are multiplying. At this rate, if the disease is not halted, it could kill half the town within the next two months. Therefore it doesn’t matter whether you call it plague or growing pains. All that matters is that you stop killing half the town.’ (39)

Related to a similar situation of the present time, the contagion through the virus, Camus speaks about the intensity of its occurrence: ‘But others have died,’ Rieux pointed out. ‘And, of course, contagion is never absolute, because if it were, we should have endless exponential growth and devastating loss of population. It’s not a matter of painting a black picture; it’s a matter of taking precautions’ (39).

Media, more particularly, social media has been a miraculous tool for communicating with our loved ones and especially to keep one occupied during the isolation period or what we call ‘lockdown’ and ‘quarantine’ in the present times. But then, Camus in *The Plague* informs: ‘Intercity telephone calls, permitted at first, caused such overcrowding in public phones booths and on the lines that they were entirely stopped for a few days, then strictly limited to what were described as urgent cases, such as deaths, births and marriages. So telegrams became our only recourse’ (54). So, quite wonderfully, now, in the more scientific and commercial times, it was not as difficult to spend time as it was some seventy years ago.

In the novel, the experience of sudden, unexpected, unprepared, and forced separation of Dr Rieux from his wife and Rambert’s from his lover are some of the exemplary stories mirroring the situation of people separated during the pandemic in the current times. In *The Plague* Camus, a writer of ideas and values, gives different ideas through different characters. Plague for one of the characters, Toru, is any form of ‘contagious moral disease’. During the prolonged and painful death of a child Rieux and Paneloux have different understanding of the death and they deal with it in different ways.

In an article, “Algeria's lessons from *The Plague* in the age of coronavirus”, BBC's Lucy Ash revisits Algeria to find parallels between Albert Camus' novel *The Plague* and how the country is coping with the coronavirus pandemic amid political upheaval. She finds one Prof. Salah Lellou, a TB expert in Oran similar to Dr Rieux of *The Plague*. Comparing the two situations Lellou says, "There was a parallel between coronavirus and Camus' plague. People started to blame the authorities". Like Dr Rieux he's also been working at a stretch for many months, rarely leaving the hospital before midnight. Regarding the current corona situation he comments, "The sick arrived in a very serious condition. Everyone was panicking - patients and the staff. We had a terrible time of it." He adds, "We're not sure if we've arrived at the peak, or if there's a second wave because right now we have another spike in cases" (BBC).

After reading *The Plague* one can reflect on the coordination of human beings which is expected from them in such a critical situation. ‘This is how, for example, a quite individual feeling such as being separated from a loved one suddenly became, in the very first weeks, the feeling of a whole people and, together with fear, the greatest agony of that long period of exile’ (53). The pandemic gives rise to despair, seclusions, loneliness, stress, denial, heroism of some and selfishness of others; sometimes unexpected behaviour of the near and dear ones; how the view of the world changes; how the nature is taking a deep breath after so long. People in the present commodified world were becoming estranged, to the family and society, pretending to be busy with they themselves not know what. It was as if such a speed of life would never slow down or halt in any case. But astonishingly, it seems as if the life came to a standstill, seeming to be an endless wait, regaining its momentum quite slowly.

Through *The Plague* Camus advises the reader to have patience and decency in such a situation, to take time before one restarts. One should start believing there is nothing important like being with loved ones, and isolation, separation, and loneliness are the most torturous, even more painful than death. The abstract but actually concrete feelings of love, hope and strength lead to cure in the situation, which has befallen. So reading literature enables the reader to understand what life actually is or what it should be.

Basically, it is the time of crisis, discomfort, hardship, natural calamities, that brings forth the way of dealing with the situation and what is one’s priority among self interest or social responsibility. Most often, medical practitioners, army personals, media personals, and other volunteers have, without worrying for their own life, exposed themselves to harmful environment. For instance, the reader has been observing this in the most recently novel Corona virus pandemic. They have proved that humanity is most important, and generosity is still there. Citizens must adapt to this critical situation, encouraging them and making them aware of the intensity of the situation is the foremost need of the hour. The literature, moreover, on pandemic is about being concerned, kind to our fellow beings, being strong individuality and giving strength and desired support to the society, finally making humanity proud.

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