



## THE PLAGUE BY ALBERT CAMUS AND WHY EVERYONE IS REREADING IT IN TIMES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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**ABSTRACT** The Plague is the story of a plague-stricken town in Oran (Algeria), and it chronicles the life of its citizens and how they deal with morbidity, absurdity, separation, etc. It was initially perceived as allegory of France under Nazi occupation, a symbol against fascism, colonization, etc. But in the times of Covid-19 pandemic, it is the first time it has been read in the most literal and crude sense. This paper aims at analyzing the key elements of the book with the startling parallels of today's world.

**KEYWORDS :** The plague, Albert Camus, Covid-19 Pandemic, denial, languishing, morbidity, objectivity, absurdity, heroism, collective destiny.

*"Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise."*  
-Albert Camus

It is said that the mark of a good book is that it changes every time you read it. The Plague by Albert Camus is a classic, and has been widely read. However, the reading experience before Covid-19 pandemic and after has been poles apart. A pre-covid reading of the book leaves the reader (unaware of the horrors of the pandemic) with an eerie, strange feeling of disconnect and possibly an existential crisis, as it is unfathomable that subjects of death and morbidity, could be described in such a causal, objective and emotionless manner by a person who is surrounded by it. Therefore, when the book was first released it was considered as an allegory of France under Nazi occupation, a symbol against fascism, colonization, etc. To put it in Camus's words, people in general "disbelieved in pestilences". A rereading of the book in the present times still gives the reader an eerie, strange feeling but the feeling is now of understanding and appreciation that someone out there understands, and they are not alone.

The Plague provides a narrative of a plague outbreak in Oran (a European town in Algeria), detailing the chillingly rapid progression of the disease as it ravages the city. Its chief narrator is Dr. Bernard Rieux, with an occasional perspective of his friends, Mr. Tarrou and Mr. Rambert-a journalist. The key elements of the book are as follows:

### Denial

Humans are in general prone to denial and it is essentially a defense mechanism in response to painful realities. Throughout the book, Camus highlights denial by the authorities, individuals, etc. even when confronted with adversity right on the face.

When the first few plague cases appeared, Dr. Rieux remarks that he 'couldn't picture eccentricities existing in a plague-stricken community, and he concluded that the chances were all against the plague's making any headway among our fellow citizens.' The authorities were 'convinced that it's a false alarm' and it 'hasn't been proved to be contagious' ! And in spite of full fledge declaration of plague and daily deaths it was 'still not sensational enough to prevent our townfolk, perturbed though they were, from persisting in the idea that what was happening was a sort of accident, disagreeable enough, but certainly of a temporary order.' People whose livelihood was shut down due the change in circumstances thought 'they were not unemployed; merely on holiday.' At the fag end of the book when the disease had already wreaked havoc and claimed countless lives but was now easing out, the people exhibited denial of a different kind. 'Calmly they denied, in the teeth of the evidence, that we had ever known a crazy world in which men were killed off like flies... In short, they denied that we had ever been that hag-ridden populace a part of which was daily fed into a furnace and went up in oily fumes, while the rest, in shackled impotence, waited their turn.'

The above is indistinguishable from what happened when the Covid-19 pandemic took the world by surprise. The World Health Organization (WHO) on 14<sup>th</sup> January, 2020, tweeted 'Preliminary investigations conducted by the Chinese authorities have found no

clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of the novel #coronavirus (2019-nCoV) identified in #Wuhan, #China.' This tweet clearly did not age well as nowadays not even a child has a doubt that Covid-19 is one of the most contagious virus. People claimed Covid-19 is a hoax and at one point the president of the United States Mr. Donald Trump compared Covid-19 to the common flu. Meanwhile there was also no dearth of lockdown violators, conspiracy theorists, anti maskers, anti vaxxers, etc. And when lockdown finally lifted, the hardships and demises were forgotten as people flocked to the street in huge numbers inadvertently causing 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> waves.

### Morbidity and Objectivity

*'each day was for us a Day of the Dead....[plague] took its daily toll of deaths with the punctual zeal of a good civil servant.'*

One of the most startling aspect of 'The Plague' is how in the most nonchalant manner death, loss, funeral, etc. is mentioned. In Oran, initially death tolls were announced per week but the number grew so exponentially that they began to announce death tolls per day. In Part III of the book, 'funerals' are described. Camus writes 'the plague victim dies away from his family' and 'the most striking feature of our funerals was their speed'. As the death toll increases across Oran, there is shortage of coffins, ambulances and even graves! At first the victims were blessed with individual graves, but with the soaring number 'men and women were flung into the death-pits indiscriminately.' All sentiments were sacrificed for efficiency. This all stems from the fact that 'One grows out of pity when it's useless' and objectivity takes its place.

During the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in India newspaper ran headlines such as '3-fold rise in cremations, delay at ghats increases waiting' 'Crowding at Delhi's cremation grounds: East MCD will run facility 24x7, North asks hospitals to stagger release of bodies' 'Covid-19: India's holiest river is swollen with bodies' And all these articles talk about death with the same objectivity as Camus does maybe because there is no emotion in the world which could possibly describe the extent of devastation a pandemic brings in.

### Absurdity

When all the above morbidity was ongoing Camus observed that 'in the very midst of catastrophe, offices could go on functioning serenely and take initiatives of no immediate relevance, and often unknown to the highest authority, purely and simply because they had been created originally for this purpose.' People would stroll through the town as usual as though nothing has happened and kept appearances. This turn to the normal when nothing is normal is the most absurd phenomenon of them all. During the Covid-19 pandemic global e-commerce jumped to \$26.7 trillion as people bought stuff they don't need. People worked from home for the most non consequential things when patients were dying for lack of oxygen. This stark contrast of dual realities and actions is what absurdity is all about.

### Collective Destiny

The Plague also covers the arc of one priest Paneloux, whose sermons changed drastically during the course of the book. When he first gave the sermons he used 'you' more (Calamity has come on you, my brethren), however in the later part of the book his 'you' converted into 'we'. 'No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all.' 'The plague

*was no respecter of persons and under its despotic rule everyone, from the Governor down to the humblest delinquent, was under sentence.'*

No one can deal with this pandemic in a vacuum, nor does it spare anyone. Sure, there are steps a person can take to protect his family, but a person's best efforts are less likely to matter if the neighbors, community, and the government, don't do their part. We admit it or not but everyone's destiny is suddenly intertwined with each other and the community can only come out of it with solidarity.

### Significance of Newspaper and Media

Camus writes that when a person converses '*from the depths of long days of brooding upon his personal distress*' and his words are '*shaped and proved in the fires of passion and regret*' then the response he got '*usually wounded him*' as clearly him and the other person are not talking of the same thing. '*Since the others could not find the truly expressive word, they resigned themselves to using the current coin of language, the commonplace of plain narrative, of anecdote, and of their daily paper.*'

Therefore, newspaper jargon became a mode of communication that connected them all. Opinions, analysis and predictions were widespread and '*one thing these prophecies had in common was that, ultimately, all were reassuring. Unfortunately, though, the plague was not.*'

In the present world, everything Camus writes about news, pans out word to word except the little aspect of assurance and optimism. The world has realised that negative sells faster and therefore, approximately 90% of all media/news is negative and sensationalist stories form 95% of media headlines. Nowadays the editorials and analysis are not about when the pandemic would end but would focus more upon the ravages it still has in store for us. Few recent headlines which ran are '*Epidemic in India is far from over, no room for 'false optimism'*', '*Half of India's population will have COVID-19 by end of year: NIMHANS*' '*The coronavirus is here to stay —*', etc. Optimism is no more an 'in' thing and so called "negativity bias" (a psychologists' term for our collective hunger to hear, and remember bad news), is setting in.

### Heroism and Decency

Camus expresses his philosophy regarding heroism through his principal characters Dr. Rieux and his friends Mr. Grand, Mr. Tarrou and Mr. Rambert who are all frontline workers who deal directly with the plague, risking their lives every day. But Camus remarks that '*by attributing over-importance to praiseworthy actions one may, by implication, be paying indirect but potent homage to the worse side of human nature. For this attitude implies that such actions shine out as rare exceptions, while callousness and apathy are the general rule.*' The plague expresses the view that just because a certain profession or job has garnered more importance at a particular time period, doesn't mean the people carrying out their day-to-day jobs should be put on a pedestal for doing their jobs. Putting up fight with the plague is '*merely logical*' and '*a matter of common decency*'. But Camus is not opposed to the idea of congratulating people for choosing that vocation.

If we go by the analogy of Camus then any action done by a person on his job shouldn't be congratulated upon. For example, say 1000 people choose the profession of armed forces. As per Camus they all should be congratulated upon their choice. However, out of those 1000 only one risks his life for fellow soldiers and gets a Medal of Honour. Should he not be called a hero for risking his life even if it was a part of his job? It was part of the job for the other 999 individuals also, but only one risked his life. It is the opinion of the present author that bravery in the face of adversity should be rewarded and it is not indirect homage to '*callousness and apathy*' but it is what it is- appreciation of a job well done. In Covid-19 period, frontline workers are called "Corona Warriors" and are also respected as heroes, because they stepped up. Out of decency or logic, it doesn't matter, what matters is that they stepped up. And Camus's Plague is an homage to these heroes in the most subtle way possible.

### Languishing

The New York Times recently ran an article titled 'There's a Name for the Blah You're Feeling: It's Called Languishing.' The article defines languishing as a sense of stagnation and emptiness, the feeling of muddling through the days, looking at your life through a foggy windshield. Languishing is not just the dominant emotion of 2021 but is also the dominant emotion of 'The Plague'. Without mentioning the word languishing, Camus goes on to describe each and every aspect of it with words like '*dazed feeling*' '*strange indifference to everything*'

*'they were asleep already'* '*forced inactivity*', etc. Just like us, people in Oran are tired with all the uncertainty and they have no idea when it will end. Camus captures this emotion very beautifully in his writing '*Hostile to the past, impatient of the present, and cheated of the future,...* because '*the habit of despair is worse than the despair itself*'.

### CONCLUSION

There is no denying the fact that there are stark similarities between the world created by Camus in *The Plague* and the present Covid-19 world. However, this statement cannot be construed to mean that Camus predicted everything perfectly. Any reader would immediately notice the lack of social distancing protocols in the world of Camus. Movie theatres, Restaurants, Opera Houses, etc are functioning at full capacity. People are idling in the streets and aside from a snide mention of 11 PM curfew, authorities are also fine with this behaviour. In the present times, even though there are cries of social distancing by all authorities imaginable, people are still people. Movie theatres, Restaurants, Opera Houses, etc are forcefully closed but the random idling at the streets cannot be denied. Aside from this minute inaccuracy Camus does a remarkable job in capturing the essence of the pandemic. It is the opinion of the author of this article that the reason people are rereading the plague is because of the way it describes what everyone is feeling with acute precision when we ourselves are unsure of our emotions. It gives people hope that human beings are essentially good and we will get out of it together with perseverance.

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