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THE NOVEL IN THE TIME OF COVID: ALBERT CAMUS' *THE PLAGUE*

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**Abstract**

*In this age, science and technology seems to override everything, but they have their limits. When science fails, society turns to other forms of knowledge to find answers to questions or to make sense out of what confounds it. In such instances, literature comes into its own as it offers another way of understanding the human condition. Since the advent of the corona virus, there has been a resurgence of interest in novels that deal with pestilence. While awaiting new novels about present experience, the pain and bewilderment caused by the Corona virus has necessitated a return to literary classics such as Albert Camus' *The Plague (Le Peste)*. This renewed interest calls for not only a reexamination of our relationship with literature, but also a reassessment of certain novels in the light of current events. The following situates Camus' novel within the tradition of plague literature and taking into consideration existentialist philosophy, examines the themes of suffering and absurd heroism before focusing on a rarely noted peculiarity, the absence indigenous characters in a novel set in North Africa. Using postcolonial critical theory as framework, this exclusion is scrutinized in depth for the power relations inherent in the narrative and discusses how the issues identified reverberate in the present pandemic.*

**Keywords:** *Plague, Covid, Existentialism, Absurdism, Postcolonial theory*

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**Introduction**

Throughout history, diseases caused by bacteria, viruses and parasites have resulted in a far greater number of deaths than natural disasters like floods,

earthquakes, or even wars. Therefore, the outbreak of epidemics and pandemics have always generated much interest among scholars from diverse fields because of the effects they have on human society, demographically, economically, politically and culturally. From ancient times to the present, diseases such as the bubonic plague, cholera, smallpox, ebola, zika virus and SARS, to mention a few, have left their marks not only on personal and communal interactions, but also on international world affairs. In some cases, diseases responsible for major epidemics that have altered course of society. For instance, yellow fever helped to wipe out the invading French army which led to the success of the Haitian revolution in 1804. The worldwide outbreak of cholera during the industrial revolution exposed the unsanitary conditions similarly led to large numbers of deaths among factory workers and the poor (Hays, 2005). While the influenza epidemic of 1918-1920 is noted for bringing about profound changes in the handling of infectious diseases as well as promoting altruism in certain groups of people who organize themselves to combat diseases just as is again being witnessed in the time of the corona virus pandemic among frontline workers. Presently, the study of how societal relations and structures are impacted by epidemics and pandemics has become an imperative as some experts are of the view that human society is entering the "age of pandemics" (Peters and Besley, 2020, p.3).

Catastrophes usually bring about the need to understand events that are difficult to comprehend, hence, the increased interest in literary narratives that speak to the turmoil caused by the corona virus that brought about the Covid-19 pandemic. Such narratives offer valuable insights on the progress of diseases in a manner that is generally easier to digest than the scientific information disseminated by the medical institutions. As Ostherr (2020) notes, when "health cannot be attained and illness cannot be vanquished through biomedical or technical interventions alone, then humanities, like literature do important transnational work that is meaningful for all concerned" especially when we need to know "how our decisions about whose life matters will shape the future to come". Creative literature is therefore valuable as it serves to provide meaning, to make sense of the world, especially of pain and suffering. Among the functions of literature is an ability to explore imaginatively issues to do with the human condition, to advance cultural conversations, to test moral systems

and to imagine the future into existence. In addition, to explaining past experiences, the present self, and a possible future, it is particularly effective in uncovering the subtle nuances in the struggle between good and evil by allowing readers to move beyond themselves "climb into the minds of other characters and worlds" as it opens up universal truths; change minds; stir empathy; and identify and express our values (Doody, 1996, p.7).

Writing in defense of poetry and by extension all literary genres, Shelley (1819) once wrote: "A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination" (p.944). But perhaps the most important function of literature is that it highlights the complexity of human conflict and nowhere is this more evident than in the novel form which lately, compared to other literary genres, has seen the greatest rise in interest. This may be because of the isolation enforced by the corona virus lock downs and people's need to make sense of the frightening realities of the pandemic. In some ways, novels are also a form of mass communication in that they reach a wide audience and the stories they tell are important not only because they are representative of society but also because even as they focus on specific experiences, they serve to deepen our understanding of being human. More so than other forms of literature, novels provide more complex portraits of characters, their ideas, values and the world they inhabit. In some instances, novels give voice to the voiceless and change societal attitudes but they could also be involved in marginalizing and silencing certain sections of society. Looking at available evidence, Peters (2020) claims that there is "a literature and philosophy of viruses, plagues, epidemics and pandemics" that could inform reactions to the present experience of Covid-19 (p.755). This philosophy of pandemics is concerned with the significance of pestilence to the human race, the various meanings ascribed to it including the age long one that claims that it is a sign of the wrath of God, and therefore, punishment for erring humankind. It also scrutinizes issues of individual and collective responsibility, the sacrifice of health workers and the decision making processes of those responsible for the safety of society. In a similar vein, Metcalf (2020) notes that novels that dwell on disease strive to elucidate the meaning of being human, of resilience,

the effects of self-isolation and the corrosive suspicion of others. Consequently, over time, a number of texts have impinged on collective memory as tomes that have captured the essence of human suffering and the disruptions brought about by pestilence. Along with literary classics such as Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) Katherine Ann Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939) and more recent publications such as Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978), Frank Herbert's *The White Plague* (1982), Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985) and Lawrence Wright's *The End of October* (2021) have contributed to our understanding of effects disease and contagion on individuals and society. Similarly, the pain and bewilderment caused by advent of the Corona virus has reignited wide spread interest in Albert Camus's *The Plague (La Peste, 1945)*. Seen by many especially in the West, as the defining novel of the period, readers have turned to it for answers to the present predicament of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some recommendations to read the novel have come from unexpected sources. For example, the World Economic Forum has named *The Plague* as one of "five books to read for context on the corona virus outbreak". Numerous newspaper reviews and commentaries attest to the same. *The New York Times* newspaper states that "*La Peste* shows how to behave in a pandemic" while the *Daily Telegraph* declared it a "guide to surviving a pandemic". *The Guardian* newspaper says that of "all Camus' novels, none described "man's confrontation – and cohabitation – with death so vividly and on such an epic scale as *La Peste*". Generally, literary critics have long referred to the novel in such favourable terms and regard it one best works of literature ever written about epidemics. For Germaine Brée (1997), "*The Plague* is, within its limits, a great novel, the most disturbing, most moving novel yet to have come out of the chaos of the mid-century" (p.7). Similarly, renowned scholar Edward Said is quick to establish his admiration for Camus to whom he devotes a chapter in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) but adds that there is need to explore some aspects of Camus' work that have hitherto been ignored by critics because doing so would enhance our understanding of them. Therefore, since its publication, *The Plague* has been highly regarded and enjoys great readership among the general public. It has also garnered much interest in diverse university courses on literature, language, philosophy, theology,

political science and history. However, Earle (2020), one of the few critics to look beyond its immediate appeal argues that "its pertinence may lie as much in its shortcomings as in its prescience" further indicating the need for a closer scrutiny of the novel particularly within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (p.45).

### The Plague-A Brief Summary

Published in the aftermath of the Second World War, *The Plague* is often read as an allegory for the Nazi occupation of France. It tells the story of an epidemic that sweeps through the Algerian city of Oran and is told from the point of view of a narrator who charts the progress of a contagion that is announced by the appearance of dead rats all over the city. At first, it is thought "impossible it should be the plague, everyone knows it has vanished from the West", says one character. The trajectory of events in the novel follow a pattern similar to what is found in other narratives concerned with pandemics such as Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1721), Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978) and Lawrence Wright's *The End of October* (2020). At first, the authorities respond with denial and refuse to name the pestilence in an attempt to conceal what is happening before eventually coming to terms with the overwhelming evidence of an infectious disease ravaging the city. A lockdown is reluctantly announced to contain the contagion and the inhabitants of the city either resign themselves to their fate or attempt to fight against the disease in their own individual ways. "Oran is an ordinary town" writes Camus at the start of the novel, nothing more than a community under French colonial rule on the coast of Algeria. The citizens are preoccupied with lives that revolve around business, travel and mundane pleasures but are jolted out of their normal complacency by the mysterious deaths of a large number of rats. Soon, the disease that is killing the rats is transmitted to humans and spreads rapidly from person to person creating panic and horror among the populace. In clear unsentimental prose, Camus's narrator describes the mental state of the citizens of Oran as an epidemic takes hold and a state of quarantine is declared. Over the months that follow, the fear and grieving of families as well as the seemingly endless monotony of "aimless days and sterile memories" combine to create a sense despair that the plague would never end. This is accompanied by a general yearning for life as it was

before the plague descended on the city which results in small acts of defiance demonstrated by dressed up people strolling by the sea and evenings spent at the theatre. In the novel, the struggle between personal desires and moral obligation to others is painted with a delicate brush that makes the situation the citizens find themselves all the more piteous when the progress of the disease would wane and then escalate even more. The main characters are each defined by their individual reactions to the scourge. Some rebel against it in self-serving ways refusing to accept that theirs is a shared condition while others find purpose in working to organize containment measures and to help ease the suffering of those who fall victim to the disease. To an uncanny degree, the sequence of events as well individual and communal responses described in the novel seem to mirror present day reactions to the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic.

The key character that novel revolves around is Dr Bernard Rieux, the narrator through whose eyes the events that unfold are viewed. He moves from patient to patient identifying the sick and administering serums to them. Working closely with a group of friends, Tarrou, Grand, and Rambert, they band together with others to form voluntary teams of people ensuring that the sick are hospitalized and a record of the trajectory of the disease is kept. As uncertainty and fear descend "dew like, from the greyly shining sky" on the city, each of them tries to cope with the harrowing events that they witness in different ways. The danger inherent in the initial reluctance of bureaucrats to impose what in Covid times is known as "social distancing" is shown up in a dramatic scene in the novel where an actor in the theatre collapses onstage with "his arms and legs splayed out under his antique robe". The terrified audience flees the opera house, "wedged together in the bottlenecks and pouring out into the street in a confused mass, with shrill cries of dismay". As the inhabitants of the city begin to realize that anyone including family and friends could be a source of contagion, a sense of desperation threatens to overwhelm them after which resignation sets in as they find themselves trapped in Oran by the quarantine that is enforced.

All aspects of life are affected by the plague. Describing "the long queues... in front of food shops", the city seems like "a waiting room". Fear pervades even on public transport as passengers "turn their backs on one another, to avoid

infection". The increasing rate of deaths leads to a lament that "the only thing we've got left is statistics" because "the plague had swallowed up everything and everyone." Camus poignantly captures the surreal "feeling of exile - that sensation of a void within which never left us, that irrational longing to hark back to the past or else to speed up the march of time." This is evocative of the Covid-19 pandemic experience when the most striking realization was the loss of the freedom of movement, the right to come and go as we pleased without being confined by new rules that were put in place to contain the corona virus. After a prolonged period of isolation, fear, deaths and loss of agency, all in Oran longed for a return to normalcy that felt like it would never come. The search for a vaccine and the sinking of hopes when trails of it failed continued for several months until of its own accord, the plague disappeared as quietly as it came.

Written in five parts, like the acts of a play, each follows upon the other to set the scene of the actions and events. Part One - introduces the main characters; Part Two - describes the different responses to the plague; Part Three - dwells on the devastation wrought by the plague and the fight against it; Part Four - mentions the small victories and the retreat of the disease; Part Five - leads up to the end of the plague and preparations to reopen the city. The extent to which Camus's insightful observations on plague conditions resonates with our Covid-19 experience confirms that epidemics and pandemics often follow similar pathways in terms of the initial disbelief of the population concerned and the reactions that subsequently follow. The difficult choices that are made to enforce the state of quarantine and to monitor the spread of the disease take their toll on the sensibilities of the people of Oran. In representing this in *The Plague*, Camus adopts an existential approach that ponders upon the nature and significance of existence. Employing the plague as a metaphor, he depicts the struggle and torment of a people alienated by difficult choices but he rejects questionable moral values, social norms, and the beliefs of established religions. Instead, the position he adopts is based on the idea that while we live in a universe that is essentially hostile, humans are capable of arriving at rational decisions independently based only on the truths that they know for certain. Thus, in the development of each character, the choices they make are instructive of what is of most value to them.

However, if the idea of choice is important for Camus, then the personal choice that he exercises as a writer in his deliberate exclusion of local Algerian Arabs from the novel raises questions about the thinking that informed this decision. Acclaimed by many critics as a "universalist" humanist thinker, he is seen as a writer whose main concern is with the plight of humankind in a world without any transcendental value (Carrol, 2007; Hayden, 2016). He appears to advocate for human fraternity without the entanglements of politics, ideologies or doctrine. Instead, he focuses on the notions of moral integrity and compassion for fellow human beings. Camus was born in Algeria and reserved for himself the right to call it home although he spent part of his adult life in France. But the Algerian Arab is rarely identified in his novels even though they must have constituted the majority of the population. Some critics explain this blindness to race as Camus' rejection of simple binaries West/East; Christians/Muslims, good/evil in preference for a humanistic outlook that sees all people as one human family (Carrol, 2007).

But this view of Camus is challenged by Said (1998) who discerns a link between Camus's works and the imperial reality of the time. Despite his preoccupation with universality and moral dilemmas, the extent to which Camus's writing appears to entirely focus on the French settlers in Algeria is "representative of Western dominance in the non-European world" (p.173). According to Said, it is from this position that the characters that populate his novel are depicted. Earle (2020) also avers that like any good metaphorical novel, *The Plague* represents much more beyond its writer's original intentions from what is excluded as what is in it (p.45). Camus' vivid depiction of a city's experience of a contagious disease and the responses it generates in the citizens is a valuable contribution to literature not least because it instructs us on how to approach the crisis created by the Covid 19 pandemic but also because it offers important insights into the time and context in which it was written. To examine Camus's explicit views on how to respond to pestilence as well as the subtle nuances found in *The Plague*, the existentialist philosophy that influences his writing as well as postcolonial critical theory will be used to frame the following analysis of major themes in the novel and also to interrogate the absence of colonial subject whose land provides a context for his narrative.

### Camus and Existentialism

Existentialist philosophy reached its height in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century mainly through the contributions of three French existentialists, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus who all embraced it in varying degrees. Of the three, Sartre is most associated with existentialism particularly because of numerous works on the subject which include essays, novels and plays such as *Nausea* (1938), *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and *No Exit* (1944). Simone de Beauvoir has similarly received critical attention for *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) which tackles the existentialist dilemma of absolute freedom and for *The Second Sex* (1949, the seminal feminist text. In their writings, the conflict between the desire for reason and the experience of irrationality encountered in everyday life plays an important role. Apart from *The Plague*, Camus' other works include essays as well novels such as *The Stranger* (1942), *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), *The Rebel* (1951) and *The Fall* (1956). So well received was his body of works that he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. While initially, he rejected being classed as an existentialist writer, and instead, saw himself as an absurdist, much of his writing seem to revolve around existentialist issues in spite of some difference in opinions with other existentialist writers who were his contemporaries. For Sartre, existentialism is interested in the creation of essence (meaning) in one's life, while absurdism according to Camus, is more concerned with the conflict between the human need to seek value and meaning in life and the inability to actually find it (Simpson, 2019). According to Camus, absurdity is not the property of existence but rather an essential feature of our relationship with the world in which we live because in choosing to live life with all its imperfections and inconsistencies, humankind has no option but to also embrace the absurd condition of existence even while rebelling against it (Sherman, 2009). Thus, only a thin line appears to separate the absurdist from the existentialist. Like other existentialist writers, a recurring theme found in his works is the idea that life is fundamentally meaningless but it can be endured by possessing personal integrity and engaging in social solidarity with others (Aronson, 2011; Austin, 2021).

Hayden (2016) claims that Camus' existential philosophy is best exemplified by his novel *The Myth of Sisyphus* (p.26). The analogy of the Greek myth of

Sisyphus who is condemned to roll a rock up a hill only for it to roll back to the bottom again and again for eternity aptly demonstrates the pointlessness of existence. But when Sisyphus decides to make this task the purpose of his being, his life at once achieves meaning. The story is a vivid illustration of the existentialist belief that humankind is always faced with "the certainty of crushing fate" and therefore, the most important matter is deciding what to do with this knowledge. In *The Plague*, the same existential philosophy is adopted as the characters grapple with the psychological impact of a disease over which they have no control. It is suggested that in a world without meaning, a crisis provides an opportunity for people to discover their true selves in the sacrifice for the greater good. Writing about pestilence, Camus states that, "What's true of all the evils in the world is true of the plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves." But Peters (2020) argues that to fully grasp the meaning of existence, empathy for others a critical requirement (p.755).

#### Postcolonial Critical Theory

While the travails of the characters are poignantly captured in *The Plague*, a significant section of the referent society is unexpectedly absent. Instead, the narrative concentrates on the French settlers whose presence in pre-independence Algeria is historically well documented but who constituted a minority of the population. Camus himself was born of European parents who settled there but the question that cannot be ignored is why he deliberately excludes the original inhabitants of the land from the novel. Consequently by this act, *The Plague* inserts itself into a historicized discourse of race because the narrative centers on French characters while totally excluding the local Arab Algerians. Herein lies the pertinence of postcolonial literary criticism as it is concerned with how literature is affected by colonialism. By taking into consideration how the 'imperial gaze' looks upon colonized people and lands, it examines the relationship between the colonizers and colonized (Ashcroft et al, 1989, p.2).

Often, in European texts on Africa, what is found are representations in which the colonizers occupy the "privileged centre," while the 'other' is marginalized or silenced (Ashcroft 1989, p. 104). Vuvlor (1994) is therefore of the opinion that *The Plague* belongs to colonial literary discourse that speaks of European

settlers as "insiders" in a land that could be reshaped according to their idea of how it should be. In a similar vein, Said (1998) asserts that Camus' exclusive focus on European characters arise from a cultural hegemony that usually sees the Western perspective as the norm and representative of and for all. This is based on the assumption that the European standpoint is the best position from which to view ideas or events and what is not European is simply ignored. In *The Plague*, there is little identification or empathy for "others" that is, the Arab Algerians who occupy the location of novel thus highlighting the unequal relationship where the power of naming lies solely with the Western colonizer. This same perspective also allows a "false notion of the universal" to dominate Camus's novel under the guise of concentrating on issues that affect all people. Consequently, in *The Plague*, European voices tell the story while the Arab Algerian other is "condemned to immobility and silence". In this way the novel is a quiet validation of the colonial order. This is why Said challenges the views of some critics who claim that Camus is mainly concerned with universal questions and does not see the racial implications of the position that he adopts. According to him, Camus's well known opposition to the nationalist movements that were happening in Algeria was due to a reluctance to understand that social revolutions are not a response to "the cosmic injustice of the human condition" but rather are a consequence of historically conditioned injustices. Growing up in Algeria, he must have been aware of the increasing nationalism of the Arab Algerian population under French colonial rule but his refusal to support them during the bloody war for independence from the French indicates the side his allegiance lies. Explaining the connection between culture and empire, Said (1998) posits that literature has "the power to narrate, or block other narratives from forming and emerging" (p.3). So by taking the Western viewpoint as the reference point, Camus's novel appears to embody and represent the French colonial power position even as it deals with an issue that is of universal concern. Therefore, in the following, Camus's existential views as reflected in the themes of suffering and of absurd heroism will be discussed, but also, by examining his representations of the French colonizers in relation to the colonized original inhabitants, the subtle nuances in the novel will be analyzed for insights into the present Covid pandemic experience.

### Suffering and Death

The central theme in *The Plague* is that of suffering, the kind that crushes the human spirit and body. The plague is signaled by dead rats that randomly appear in different parts of the city ominously foreshadowing what will happen to the citizens of Oran. But one of characters declares that "It's impossible it should be the plague, everyone knows that it has vanished from the West". The astonishment that first greets the idea that the disease ravaging the city may be the plague comes from the belief that epidemics are no longer a threat in Western Europe of which Oran is merely an outpost of France. Therefore, the people of Oran continue with all the other activities that make up their lives. Then, as the plague proceeds to sweep through the city, bringing contagion and death month after month, they begin to change their view that this is a temporary inconvenience. When quarantine is imposed and the city is cut off from the outside world, the suffering of the people intensifies in a variety of ways. Disconnected from the rest of the world, the narrator notes "The first thing that the plague brought to our town was exile". Reaction to this state of affairs differs from person to person as they are forced to deal with indefinite separation from loved ones and to watch family and friends die painfully from the disease. Some resign themselves to the situation while others like a journalist Rambert, make several attempts to circumvent the new rules. Stuck in Oran after the gates close, he begs Dr Rieux for a certificate of health so he could return to his beloved wife in Paris, but Rieux cannot help him. "There are thousands of people placed as you are in this town," he says. Eventually, the citizens are compelled to come to terms with the knowledge that the plague erases the "uniqueness of each man's life" even as it "heightens awareness of each individual's vulnerability and powerlessness" indicating the all-inclusive nature of the affliction. The plague had erased the usual habit of indifference to suffering by forcing the people to take note of their individual mortality.

Earle (2020) notes that while "*The Plague* quite literally and clinically relays the symptoms and consequences of that disease, the bacillus under the author's lens is not so much physiological as sociological, and philosophical" (p.46) Descriptions of the physical effects of disease mention the high fever, vomiting and painful swellings called "buboes" but the most powerful passages in *The Plague* are those that speak of the social and psychological effects of the epidemic on the people of Oran. Epidemics not only bring fear but also separation, loneliness and boredom. The physical torments of the victims of the disease are related in meditative observations that draw attention to the horrors of repulsive buboes that burst out on their skins and to the lime pits where the dead are buried. On the other hand, describing the desperate but unquenchable

desire for life that is found times of great crisis, the narrator describes the "hectic exaltation" of the ordinary people trapped in the epidemic's bubble as they try to combat their sense of isolation and loss. They dress up and promenade aimlessly along Oran's boulevards or go to restaurants in a semblance of normality but always ready to take to flee at the first sign of illness in fellow diners. As the plague scythes its way through the city, places of worship are abandoned and even funerals are banned for fear of contagion so that survivors are denied even the solace of proper burials for their dead.

There is little use of figurative language in the novel nonetheless the plague is represented both in the literal sense as well as a metaphorical problem. For Camus, the plague highlights the human condition that inevitably brings suffering and loss. Alluding to the inevitability of death, one of the characters, Tarrou, declares "Each of us has the plague within him". This view is reflected in the bleakness in the novel which Earle (2020) claims arises from uncertainty about the future and the constant sense of dread (p.44). The fact that life ends in death makes it meaningless for those who do not take recourse in any religion or ideology. Life becomes purely a matter of passing the time until the end comes. This is approach to the transience of human life is illustrated in the novel by the old man who passes his time spitting on cats and the sick man who spends his days ceaselessly moving peas from one pot to another. Both instances symbolize the absurdity of life. But on the other hand, while their actions might seem pointless and ridiculous to others, for the two concerned, they provide structure and meaning to their lives.

Of the deaths described in the novel, two in particular stand out for what they tell us of the suffering of the people of Oran. First, the death of Michel, the concierge in Dr Rieux's building is significant as it marks the end of the first period of the epidemic. At this stage, the citizens of Oran are merely perplexed by rats dying all around them and begin to feel a sense of dread as they grasp how quickly the contagion spreads. As death becomes a constant presence, a pervasive nervous tension descends on the city that is only punctuated by the gunshots of the special brigade assigned to kill cats and dogs that may be carriers of the disease. Large portions of the novel is devoted to different scenes of the infected and the dying but the most poignant example of suffering is the excruciating death of Jacques, the young son of the magistrate, M. Othon. All who witness it, Rieux, Tarrou, Rambert, Grand and Father Paneloux, though seasoned by the suffering that they have already seen, are horrified into silence by the death throes of the young victim. The experience elicits different reactions ranging from anger to disgust that an innocent child is made to die in such manner hence there is a general rejection of Father Paneloux's attempt to

explain it from a religious angle. The irrational evil of the plague that kills without regard for age or status is further illustrated in the moving bewilderment of the child's father, M. Othon. Once he exuded strength and power but now presents a devastated figure in his bereavement. The novel emphasizes that suffering and loss have always been part of the lives of citizens of Oran, the only difference now is that they more aware of it with the coming of the plague. Throughout history, various religions have attempted to explain why humankind is visited by plagues. In Camus's novel, this religious interpretation is provided by the two sermons of the Jesuit priest, Father Paneloux, who offers the Christian view. In a sermon soon after the plague begins, he chastises the assembled congregation, accusing them of bringing God's wrath upon themselves because they had not taken His commandments seriously nor do they appreciate enough His mercy and forbearance. The advent of the plague should therefore be embraced as an opportunity to return to God in obedience and gratitude. The second sermon that is delivered after he witnesses the horrible death of a child is given in a milder tone but he still maintains his position that God cannot be questioned if you are a true Christian. Being all-powerful and all-knowing, God's design must be accepted as it even if includes the death of the innocent. Later, the priest himself succumbs to disease and dies still trying to validate his Christian belief by rejecting medical intervention and yielding instead to divine providence.

This way of thinking is incompatible with Camus's existentialist philosophy as he would rather humankind struggle against death even as they accept their mortality. The attitude of a number of characters, Dr Rieux, Rambert, Grand, Tarrou, and Dr Castell whose daily struggle against the plague Bree (1997) describes as "undramatic and stubborn" is representative of Camus's view. Their resistance to the plague demonstrates the kind of defiance that Camus approves and one which readers in the time of Covid-19 can relate. However, we cannot empathize with the Arab Algerians because nothing is mentioned of them. Yet, Camus himself suggests that in order to make meaning out of something that is indiscriminate and beyond human control, empathy for the suffering of others is important. Denying the Algerian Arabs a voice and focusing only on the experiences of a closed community of Europeans in Oran not only conveys the message that their views are irrelevant but also calls into question his proclaimed universalist views. What Vultur (1994) describes as Camus's ideal of "human fraternity in its pure form" appears limited to only a section of colonial Algerian society (p.10). Despite the universality of his themes, it is difficult to dissociate Camus's work from the colonial and literary discourses prevalent at the time he wrote the novel. Although the nuances of the

colonial situation of Oran are hidden from view by Camus's Universalist perspective, the novel does illustrate Ashcroft's (1989) assertion that writings by Europeans tend to reconstruct the colonial hierarchies as marginalized people are not placed in the centre of narratives (p.104).

### Absurd Heroism

For Camus, the absurd is produced through conflict between our expectations of a rational universe and the actual universe that it is indifferent to our expectations (Austin, 2020). When it comes to dying, there has been no advancement for humankind, no escape from he refers to as our 'underlying condition' of mortality (de Botton, 2020). In response to the conflict between the human need to seek meaning and purpose in life and the difficulty of finding, he creates the absurd hero who embraces the contradiction and the struggle involved in living with the paradox (Aronson, 2011). In *The Plague*, all the characters are defined by their individual reactions to the scourge. The reflections of the main protagonist, Dr Rieux, therefore allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological trauma of watching victims of the plague die all around him. His realization that the plague cannot be defeated entirely because it has visited humanity before and will do so again in spite of our best efforts does not push into despair or a state of passivity. Instead, his commitment to fighting the disease not only enables him to mount an unyielding resistance in solidarity with the victims but also endows him with a sense of purpose. Some, like Cottard, cannot see beyond their own needs and at first rebel against the palpable air of dread that hangs over the city by attempting suicide. When this fails, he begins to view the quarantine as an opportunity to exploit other people. But a group of men gather around Dr Rieux and unite against the incursion the plague in spite of the danger of contracting it through their close work with the victims. Their individual reasons for doing so are different but they recognize that they are all involved in the same struggle.

The journalist, Rambert, who is in Oran to write about living standards in the Arab colony is trapped in the city by the quarantine. Though unprepared for what he encounters, and after initial attempts to escape, he sets aside his need to return to his wife and joins the vanguard against the disease. Grand, a lowly civil servant with dreams of becoming a great man of letters also suspends his literary efforts to concentrate his energies on the work against the plague. The least likely hero figure, he responds to the plague with innate practical goodness that inspires other to put up a fight against the disease leading Dr Rieux to describe him as "the true embodiment of the quiet courage that inspired the sanitary groups". Those who enroll in the "sanitary squads," are people who are



motivated by the urge to contribute to the efforts against contagion because doing nothing is not an option. Such people enable the "townsfolk to come to grips with the disease and convinced them that, now that plague was among us, it was up to them to do whatever could be done to fight it. On this earth there are pestilences and there are victims", Tarrou surmises, "and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences". The solidarity and total commitment to ease the suffering to others that Dr Rieux and his friends present against the plague is the best response against the absurdity of indiscriminate death. The importance of striving to prevail over the plague and not to give way to despair is emphasized in a conversation between Dr Rieux and Tarrou:

"Yes. But your victories will never be lasting; that is all."

Rieux's face darkened.

"Yes, I know that. But it's no reason for giving up the struggle."

"No reason, I agree. Only, I now can picture what this plague means for you."

"Yes. A never ending defeat." (p. 128)

Humankind is always faced with "the certainty of crushing fate" but the most important existential question is to deciding what to do with this knowledge. Dr Rieux's response to the situation is to carry on without the 'resignation that ought to accompany' his efforts. This determination not to give in to despair in face of inevitability of death is what Camus describes as absurd heroism. The same is depicted in the heroic fight of Tarrou who is one of the last victims of the disease in the novel. In his final moments, he refuses to succumb to death without a struggle as he tells the doctor, "I don't want to die, and I shall put up a fight. But if I lose the match, I want to make a good end of it." The futility of trying to defeat death is affirmed by the serum created by Dr Castel that appears to merely draw out the process of his dying.

Existential philosophy claims that whether through plagues or wars, humankind is susceptible to sudden death which can render life at once meaningless. Thus Farr (2020) asserts that while there is no guarantee or safety against death, in spite of this, Camus recommends striving to ameliorate suffering and not to yield to despair even in the face of overwhelming odds because in that very resistance lies the dignity of humankind. When at some point, Tarrou asks him "Why do you yourself show such devotion, considering you don't believe in God?" Dr Rieux answers that if he believed in an all-powerful God, he would cease curing the sick and leave that to Him. This rejection of the acceptance advocated by the priest Father Paneloux emerges from Camus's conviction that the answers to life's big questions cannot be found in religion or indeed any

formal ideology but rather within oneself. Hence, Dr Rieux's personal stand is demonstrated in his tireless work of administering advice and serums to the victims of the disease. But not once does he consider himself a saint. He is just doing whatever needs to be done against encroaching death: "This whole ridiculous thing is not about heroism. It's about decency. It may seem a ridiculous idea, but the only way to fight the plague is with decency," he says. When asked to define "decency", Dr Rieux responds by saying "In general, I can't say, but in my case I know that it consists in doing my job." Doing one's duty and the "certitude that a fight must be put up" is the central message of the novel.

In *The Plague*, the suffering inflicted by the pestilence is depicted as an existential problem that cannot be grasped through rational thinking. Neither is it framed as an individual burden but as a shared experience. Embracing the universality of suffering is portrayed as something that has the potential of turning into a positive force when people become conscious of the duty owed to others. This why it is disconcerting to find that although Camus writes that this is a collective catastrophe: "a feeling in which all shared alike," the fear and suffering is depicted as the exclusive experience of the French citizens of Oran. The romantic picture of a land of sun, sea and sand that he paints in the novel does not include its local inhabitants as nothing is mentioned of how the Algerian Arab population is affected by the disease. At the time Camus wrote his novel, the same as now, pestilence is something usually associated with Africa. Presently, the fact that Africa is not as ravaged by the corona virus as may be expected is an anomaly that is in keeping with his existential belief that life is irrational and absurd. But the subtle reasons why the Arab Algerian is absent in the novel are submerged under Camus universal humanism. Historically, Oran has experienced epidemics of the bubonic plague in 1678, 1921, 1931 and 1949 which Camus used as source material but then it raises the question why Algerian Arabs do not feature in the novel. Is it that pestilence in Africa is only important for how it affects the white French colonialists? Earle (2020), one of the few critics to notice the absence of Arab characters in Camus's novel points out that the failure to mention that Algeria was under colonial control is puzzling especially given that the novel is also meant to be an allegory of the Nazi occupation of France. If the plague in Camus's novel is meant to represent the metaphorical seizure of political power, then it would seem that Camus has also "effectively staged a fictional occupation in a country already under a real one" (Earle, 2020, p.46) All the characters are Camus's fellow Europeans although the greater number of those who would have been affected by the plague must have been the Arabs as they

constitute the greater majority of Oran's population. Instead, deliberately by use of his pen, Camus erases a whole people just as the plague wipes out a large number of the city's inhabitants. Thus not registering the presence of the Arabs is symptomatic of what Said refer to as the "colonial malaise" as the universalism hinted in Dr Rieux's statement "We're all involved in it" and "the virus does not discriminate" is belied by the invisibility of the Arabs. For all its insistence on the necessity of solidarity for the protection of all people, the novel falls short in the way the local Arab population of Oran is entirely overlooked. Yet as Earle (2020) points out, both the plague in Camus's novel as well as Covid-19 call for an "ethos of community" that demand that people work together to end contagion (p.47).

Plagues test the mettle of humankind, their endurance, compassion, solidarity and their will to effect changes. One of the characters in Camus' novel, Tarrou, declares "Each of us has the plague within him" alluding to the inevitability of death. But Camus also extends the metaphor to include the virus of indifference to the plight of others that is within the core of humankind. So, it should not be that the plagues can come and go without changing anything in hearts of humankind. However, just as Arabs are omitted in Camus's novel, similar exclusionary practices are evident in the speed with which Europe closed its borders to Africans at the first hint of the Omicron variant identified in South Africa. This came on the heels of the disbelief in the West that Covid-19 did not impact more severely on the African continent as expected. While viruses may not discriminate, ways of handling it do as the West closed ranks and marginalized "others" in the distribution of the life-saving vaccines. But crises have a way of shaking up the social order as seen in the "Black Lives Matter" movement witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic which highlighted the need to address racial, economic and political barriers that pull people apart because, in the end, we are all in the same boat.

### Conclusion

One of the functions of literature in the form novels is the empathy for others that they teach. Hence, *The Plague* received a lot of attention because it explores issues relevant to the present pandemic, the way it probes human reactions to pestilence, and its strong belief in the courage and solidarity of ordinary people. Its focus on existentialist questions of meaning, human fate, and death are pertinent to the world-wide experience of the Covid-19 pandemic which has similarly produced the kind of conflict that challenges existing ways of thinking including how we live, connect with others, and also, how certain literary texts are interpreted. Deemed essential reading for the Covid-19 pandemic, the above

reexamination of Camus' novel became necessary not only because it speaks to our times but also because while literature can help us to understand human reactions to crises, embedded in it also is the potential to change behavior and to imagine a future that embraces the existence of all people.

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