



Identifying the Absurd during the COVID-19 Pandemic through the Lens of Albert Camus' *The Plague*

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Abstract

In a situation put forward by the novel Coronavirus where the masses are forced to confront the vulnerability of their lives, *La Peste* or 'The Plague' by French philosopher Albert Camus, written in 1947, urges people to re-think their choices as a society and the safety measures taken by the authorities. The novel also issues warnings for its readers on one of the greatest flaw of humankind – unpreparedness – to take home and contemplate about. This paper, through a critique of the novel, establishes parallels between *The Plague's* events and the material and metaphysical problems we face as a society today. Moreover, this paper also explores Camus' philosophy of the Absurd and how, through its lens, one can identify and overcome the struggles of existence when a populist threat like the Coronavirus pandemic emerges.

Keywords: COVID-19, Coronavirus, Pandemic, The Absurd.

1. Introduction

The Plague (La Peste) is a novel written by French philosopher and author Albert Camus in the year 1947 and chronicles the outbreak of bubonic plague in the semi-fictional city of Oran in Algeria during the 1940s. While writing for the clandestine French resistance newspaper called *Combat* during the Second World War, Camus, as editor in chief, simultaneously worked on the early drafts of what would be later published as *La Peste*. *The Plague* tackles two of the most common disasters that have befallen humanity almost cyclically, no matter how much we prepare for it – outbreaks of epidemics or pandemics and war. In doing so, Camus also provides the readers with an insight on how different people react to something that is designed to burst their bubble of safety, status and well-being and remind them of the fragility of their existence as well as the meaninglessness of life itself. More than seventy years after the novel was published, with the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus (termed COVID-19) in the year 2019, people across the globe were faced with a similar confrontation with something they were not prepared for and that which shattered the illusion of the sense of security that had so complacently crystallized into the very fabric of their lifestyles. Tens of millions of people have been infected, several hundred thousands dead and a figure greater than both these numbers have been rendered unemployed due to lockdown restrictions and the age of the 'New Normal'. Akin to those uncertain times when the world was prone to plague, something still considered a medieval happening, the uncertainty has managed to make it to 2021 and may even continue indefinitely, making *The Plague* an increasingly relevant novel among the masses for various reasons, with people desperately seeking an escape from the harsh reality, wanting to find some comfort in the shared suffering with people of Oran or plainly wanting to know what Camus

would have had to say about the pandemic, given he was alive in today's day and age.

1. Addressing the Absurd

In the novel, Albert Camus delineates his philosophy of the Absurd which highlights the moment of realization in the life of a modern where he comes to the conclusion that life and the whole concept of living is meaningless; that in the face of a terminal situation where there is imminent danger to one's life, the will for solidarity is what would keep one afloat. When faced with this understanding, one is left with three possible ways out – a leap to religious faith, pure acceptance of this condition of living and, the most disrespected choice for him, adoption of a suicidal and nihilistic attitude. At this point of life, man is faced with the irrational and with a longing for happiness and reason. This is how the Absurd is born out of a conflict between man and a world that is veiled in unreasonable silence. From this moment of recognition, absurdity becomes a vexing passion, that which is difficult to live with. But whether or not man possesses the zest and zeal to live with it is what defines the strength of man (Camus, 1955). Investigating the Absurdist philosophies and struggling against the plague to save humanity, the novel chronicles people explore the importance of language and communication, what it is like to live on the edge of the Absurd, how it feels to experience oxymoronic emotions at the same time and how faith in humanity can fluctuate wildly with each passing day when one is amidst ignorant people obsessed with social status, arbitrary hierarchical systems and over-optimism. The reason *The Plague* hits home for so many people is not just the fact that humanity's current situation is frighteningly similar to Oran, but also that the reminder of the meaninglessness of life and the limited options of action one is left with after this realization.

But this enlightenment should not result in desperation and, instead, lead to feelings of solidarity and acceptance. Like the people of Oran, the modern world, so preoccupied with the next big piece of technology, assumed that pandemics are a thing of the past; something one cannot see, cannot wreak havoc in the lives of millions and certainly not with the advancement in medical science that we have achieved today. These assumptions, according to Camus, lead to behaviour patterns that were despised the most by Camus – an obsession with status, denial of human mortality, moral policing and other superficial, narcissistic and unfounded beliefs. Camus points out how the people of Oran think that, “‘It's unthinkable. Everyone knows it's ceased to appear in western Europe’” (p. 18). What follows this statement is a haunting “Yes, everyone knew that, except the dead men” (p. 18). It has also been theorized that the text has been written as an allegory for the German occupation of France during the Second World War (Stelson, 2021). Wars, like plagues are one of the events that keep repeating themselves throughout the human history, destroying lives of anyone involved in them. Camus (1948) writes:

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... When a war breaks out, people say: “It's too stupid; it can't last long.” But though a war may well be “too stupid,” that doesn't prevent its lasting. (p. 18)

3. Parallels between *The Plague* and today's world

More often than not, people turn towards literature in times of even deep personal crises to make sense of the world or escape it or both. The global spread of the novel Coronavirus was a similar event shared by people across countries, laying bare the innate need in human beings to connect, share and ideate. The world of fiction gained more readers and tales of epidemics and apocalypses saw a greater customer base than ever before. Sales of stories that relate to the

current global scenario sky-rocketed and *The Plague* was rushed for re-prints since people were almost panic-buying this work of literature as it seemed like Albert Camus had predicted our future decades ago and yet the complacency of humanity managed to land themselves in a soup. The novel was a handbook for the Coronavirus crisis at an individual as well as social level and yet was brutally overlooked by citizens, governments, media and newspapers alike. This intensely layered meditation on the human nature, the Kafkaesque civilization and the absurdity of life itself was revived in public attention and even though this modern worshipping of the novel would be of little consolation to Camus, if not a massive disappointment, it becomes impossible to deny the parallels between the happenings in the novel and the current global situation and all that we could have done to avoid it or deal with it more efficiently.

In *The Plague*, Oran is called an ordinary town where nothing extraordinary really happened. The people of Oran, much like people in today's capitalistic world, are concerned with making money and maintaining their social status until a deadly epidemic ravage through the town, forcing people to limit their mobility and social interaction to control the plague. What stands out is the authorities, not taking any strict sanitation or awareness actions even after several tell-tale signs of the imminent disaster occur consecutively. Unfortunately, something similar happened with the advent of the novel Coronavirus with the pathogen labeled as a hoax and even an imaginary enemy conjured up by the government to create panic among the masses so that they are easier to govern. Labelled as the "Chinese virus", it was also believed for the longest time that the spread of the virus was created and funded by the Chinese government, reminding one about the importance of being proactive, questioning everything around oneself and fact-checking rumors.

The current population, just like the population of Oran, followed the same pattern of reaction as delineated by Camus in the novel – unpreparedness for sudden disaster, ignorance of the imminent pandemic, denial, complacency and then acceptance. Pointing out how history operates on its precedents, Camus (1948) talks about pandemics, disasters, famines and wars and how they manage to almost always catch us off-guard:

A pestilence isn't a thing made to man's measure; therefore we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogey of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away. But it doesn't always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is men who pass away, and the humanists first of all, because they haven't taken their precautions. (p. 19)

Just like the people of Oran kept assuming the epidemic will act orderly and rationally, spreading their ignorance further with each passing day, the "anti-maskers" worldwide began sprouting across the globe demanding the right to breathe without a mask, assuming COVID-19 to be, as politicians put it, 'just another flu'. But irrespective of what people think of it or want it to be, epidemics and pandemics too, operate on their own precedents, infecting all alike, appearing constantly throughout history and standing out as an arbitrary entity, a symbol of the Absurd, reminding us about the meaninglessness of the social hierarchical systems that we have so religiously crafted and followed since centuries.

M. Michel, a character in *The Plague*, denies the first few rats dying of the bubonic plague just like the government later ignored the rising death toll, eerily foreshadowing India's condition during the first as well as the second wave of COVID-19. From a shortage of beds and staff in the first wave in the year 2020 to a shortage of oxygen cylinders in the year 2021, there have been enough debates on whether the Indian government was caught off-guard or was it just ignorant of the plight of its citizens. In an increasingly capitalistic world, one is hence forced to ask oneself – does capitalism care about the people who follow it? One can only imagine how much the divide between the rich and poor has grown during this one-and-a-half year long and still ongoing pandemic with Indian migrant labourers having to relocate several times while the corporate sector casually resorted to a work-from-home arrangement.

Camus, in *Myth of Sisyphus*, points out how a universe without a master does not seem either "sterile" or "futile" to Sisyphus as each atom of the boulder he pushes constitutes a world within itself (Camus, 1955). From a Marxist perspective, viewing Sisyphus as a laborer in a

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capitalistic world doomed at the hands of the master, who is the employer, and the act of continuously pushing the boulder is the labour done to earn a living, would result in some form of revolt against the deplorable working conditions at one point of time. This represents the notion of our collective revolt against the Absurd which Camus was familiar with, but not completely against. In that sense, it would be safe to concur that Camus does not harbour as much disdain for capitalism as he did for unpaid labour, undignified labour or anything threatening a worker's life or liberty. The current capitalistic environment, akin to Sisyphus' fate, thus, plays a big role in the realization of the Absurd where nothing has any meaning unless someone prescribes it one, to come to terms with its absurdity. In the COVID-19-stricken world, with a massive industrial decline and collapse of healthcare, crumbled world economies and faltering policies trying to revive growth rates, we have discovered the vulnerable heel of Achilles i.e. capitalism. Underfunded systems, aged facilities, exploited labour and raging unemployment might be the tell-tale signs of a global tsunami which awaits economies. At the same time, the pandemic sheds light on the urgency of implementation of radical policies and relevant political actions, highlighting the role of the State in the model of capitalism. During an emergency like this, the State and the private sector have to join hands to alleviate problems of implementation and consumption of unfair labour.

The bureaucracy red-taping Rambert's escape from Oran in the novel and functioning as if nothing happened is a classic example of what is called a 'Kafkaesque lifestyle', one which is characterized by that which "constitutes mysticism, unknown power, human fear, distortion of time and space, unavoidable sense of menace and foreboding and also the mechanism of panopticon" (Agrawal & Kaur, 2019). This event serves as the ultimate symbol of habit, absurdity and tradition wherein doing a job becomes a priority even when the human spirit itself is falling apart everywhere around them. Today newspapers and tabloids sensationalize celebrity death tolls, ignore the early signs of an epidemic and carry "home-remedies" for something that requires proper medical attention. Moreover, the home-made "antidotes" of the plague which were so enthusiastically printed in Oran's newspapers were nothing but a distraction from the greater catastrophe which had no end in sight.

Following negligence and denial comes a very late acceptance of an emergency situation in Oran with lockdown being enforced in the town and citizens instructed to self-quarantine. A majority of the characters in the novel struggle to communicate which only results in frustration, once this privilege is taken away with policies of social distancing and quarantine. In a novel characterized by sparse and curt dialogues conveying this struggle, Camus showcases the innate craving for random human contact that one acquires once one is exiled. In Part 1 of the novel itself, even before the plague is announced officially, Cottard becomes intensely gregarious to make as many acquaintances as possible to protect himself from getting arrested. Grand misses out on huge opportunities due to his failure in proper communication which is also reflected in the way it becomes impossible for him to come up with the perfect first-line for his manuscript. Getting preoccupied with language, a lot of thought is put in describing how "a secret grief" went behind Cottard's suicide attempt. But this is a difference that exists between Oran and our world. With the internet and popularity of social media, it has become possible to communicate and stay in touch while also exploring the richness of people's inner lives. In Part 5 of the novel, Grand finally scratches out all the adjectives from his first line of the manuscript. His attitude towards language has now become curt.

Everyone sees the epidemic as an obstacle to their happiness instead of seeing it as a public calamity, narrativizing their experiences and attaching unique meanings to what is a shared struggle. The people of Oran use this uniqueness as a coping mechanism and refrain from talking about the plague, lest their struggle becomes common. Camus (1948) writes:

Whereas in the early days of the plague they had been struck by the host of small details that, while meaning absolutely nothing to others, meant so much to them personally, and thus had realized, perhaps for the first time, the uniqueness of each man's life; now,

on the other hand, they took an interest only in what interested everyone else, they had only general ideas, and even their tenderest affections now seemed abstract, items of the common stock. (p. 90)

An “anti-plague serum” is finally supplied to the people of Oran but it can only treat the infected. As the death tolls continue to spiral, a picture of India’s depleting emergency reserves of oxygen and vaccines during the second wave of the pandemic comes to mind. Seeking help from other countries and court orders demanding fixed oxygen supply while citizens gasp for it is not an easy event to forget. The politicians’ public speeches and official notices issued in public interest carries almost an unfamiliar and inappropriate language full of optimism which conveniently undermines the seriousness of the invisible enemy. With characters of *The Plague* losing meaningfulness of life like the man who spat on cats ceasing to come to the balcony anymore and like the hotel manager getting depressed who lost all his customers, all sense of individuality is stripped away. During a plague or a war, people are incinerated like the rats and the only thing left is statistics and a shared sense of loss and a more social approach to the Absurd. Camus (1948) explains it as:

Now, at least, the position was clear; this calamity was everybody’s business. What with the gunshots echoing at the gates, the punctual thuds of rubber stamps marking the rhythm of lives and deaths, the files and fires, the panics, and formalities, all alike were pledged to an ugly but recorded death, and, amidst noxious fumes and the muted clang of ambulances, all of us ate the same sour bread of exile, unconsciously waiting for the same reunion, the same miracle of peace regained. (p. 90)

In the novel, Camus uncovers the unsettling simplicity of human nature: “The truth is that everyone is bored and devotes himself to cultivating habits. Our citizens work hard, but solely with the object of getting rich. Their chief interest is in commerce,” (pp. 1-2) which hits home with people trying to keep misery at bay these days by indulging in cooking, seeking out newer opportunities on the internet and coming to terms with ‘the new normal’, lest misery becomes a habit. Some resort to religion, following the footsteps of Father Paneloux in the novel, asserting that the pandemic is the punishment for our collective sins.

4. How we can approach the disease?

Coronavirus, like the plague, coerces one to live in the present with uncertainty for future and nostalgia for the past, with every passing day seeming more exhaustive than the one before it. Living in denial or resorting to religion and vague superstitions or prophecies for hope might be a pathetic thing to do but it is only natural to react this way. To quote Camus, “Indeed, we all were up against the wall that plague had built around us, and in its lethal shadow we must work out our salvation”. (p. 109)

Camus’ main characters represent these different ethos of living after the point of realization of the meaninglessness of life: Dr. Rieux and Tarrou, in observing the plague and helping those around them adopt a humanistic approach of accepting the plague as it is and struggling against it; Father Paneloux, like the several ‘god-men’ and ‘god-women’ in India, urge the masses to take a leap of faith and come up with irrational explanations for the plague, calling it a punishment for their sins; finally, comes Cottard, who has not only tried to commit suicide but has also surrendered to the plague (the most cowardly approach to the Absurd, as Camus says) and laments, “You know as well as I do, once you have plague your number’s up” (p. 78) drawing parallels to these fictional characters, India has its frontline workers and journalists who are, like Dr. Rieux and Tarrou, fulfilling their medical role, spreading awareness and saving lives. Then come some spiritual leaders and organizations who come up with questionable explanations for the COVID-19 outbreak and finally, the willful dead – the students and adults who could not keep on their matter-of-fact response for any longer and gave in to depression, anxieties and other struggles and took their own lives.

At the end of the novel, people come back to their normal lifestyles and pretend as if

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nothing happened and that the fruit of immortality has once again been achieved by humankind while the dead are honoured. With today's world terrifyingly following Oran's steps, there is no reason to think that the modern world would not pretend as if the Coronavirus outbreak was a collective dream, one that they ought to forget. And the vicious cycle of complacency leading to unpreparedness leading to being caught off-guard leading to disasters will continue for generations to pass on to the next ones, leaving humanity doomed forever until someone learns from these precedents. But the question of when will humanity actually learn from these mistakes will always haunt the back of our collective consciousness. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus compares humanity to the doomed Sisyphus and asked his readers to imagine Sisyphus happy when the boulder he had to carry, after reaching the top of the hill, rolled back down for eternity. In doing so, Camus points out what makes life worth enduring after all – the struggle of Sisyphus towards the height which is enough to fill a man's heart and imagine Sisyphus happy. (Camus, 1955)

While humans stand in solidarity, struggling against an invisible enemy, many rare species of flora and fauna come back to the surface; plants live longer and air becomes clearer which has been termed as 'reverse chaos' in recent times (Banerjee et al., 2020). This implies that *The Plague* is not a tale of suffering or humanity overcoming the Absurd, but simply coming to terms with it as renowned sculptor Bernini once said, "Where there is death, there is a new meaning." Plagues and wars are a universal condition of life – that humanity is vulnerable to extinction or decimation by either actions of others or its own kind. We exist on the edge of the Absurd which reminds us about the importance of what we fundamentally have – language and empathy. Albert Camus had also claimed that he wrote *The Plague* to understand what a plague meant for humanity and that "the subject seems so natural" to him. In modern times, an attempt at accepting and reducing stress, declaring solidarity in uncertainty and avoiding over-consumption of news which carry nothing but gruesome statistics may help eliminate unhealthy habits and aid coping with 'death anxiety' (Banerjee et al., 2020). 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. This has been termed as 'reverse chaos' in one of the recent articles in the Guardian (The Guardian, Comments, as on 8 April 2020). In that way, *The Plague* is not a tale of despair, but that of rejuvenation and lessons learnt for 'redemption' through the 'obvious' sufferings. The Novel coronavirus has ironically hijacked our daily life and communication, more than the respiratory system. It becomes difficult and confusing for the general public to be bombarded with plethora of data being updated every day. Similarly discordant messages are prevalent about the lifespan of the virus, the presumed duration of the pandemic, routes of infection, safety precautions, dietary habits and the necessary period of lockdown.

5. Solutions through the lens of *The Plague*

The Novel coronavirus has ironically hijacked our daily life and communication, more than the respiratory system. It becomes difficult and confusing for the general public to be bombarded with plethora of data being updated every day. Similarly discordant messages are prevalent about the lifespan of the virus, the presumed duration of the pandemic, routes of infection, safety precautions, dietary habits and the necessary period of lockdown. Not one day has passed in last two months, on which every source of media has not debated or argued about one or more of these aspects, ultimately with an ambiguous solution in the end. Just like the plague took everything away from the people of Oran, the novel Coronavirus has hijacked the lives of many with people becoming preoccupied with data thrown at them, discordant messages about terms that, until now, were used in medical research papers only, the lifespan of the virus, duration of the pandemic and other ambiguous data. Moreover, to add to the troubles, people are falling prey to faulty treatments, anxieties, toxic positivity, not to mention the bombardment of misinformation and sensationalized false news (Garrett, 2020). One is reminded of the

importance of meaningful and realistic communication where the objective is not to narrativize facts. Camus begs his readers to view the pandemic as it is and not indulge in judgment or moralization because it will ultimately lead to pathos. Valorizing the dead, slandering those who tried and unfortunately failed and lip-service for frontline workers instead of holding the authorities accountable does nothing. One can heartily agree with Dr. Rieux's character in the following excerpt:

However, there's one thing I must tell you: there's no question of heroism in all this. It's a matter of common decency. That's an idea which may make some people smile, but the only means of righting a plague is, common decency.' 'What do you mean by 'common decency'?' Rambert's tone was grave. 'I don't know what it means for other people. But in my case I know that it consists in doing my job. (Camus, 1948, p. 81)

To fight the problem, one must consider the seriousness of it. Coronavirus is not an exception to this rule and since people fall short of completing their duties, the virus keeps taking its toll. Preventive, reactive and quarantine measures should all work together in a pandemic as individually, these measures are not enough and there is no space for complacency, procrastination, denial, or ignorance even at an individual level.

There is much to learn and then practice from *The Plague* which makes its readers regret not reading it before the pandemic forced them to. The first message of the novel is to always value and treasure family, friends as well as one's near and dear ones for plagues and wars strike without warning and wear one down with anxieties so much so that isolation and feelings of exile and imprisonment begin to settle in which leaves one no other option but to act rebelliously. Rambert perfectly fits as an example for this situation in desperately trying to escape Oran illegally to meet his wife but being unable to do so which leads to further desperation. Secondly, distinguishing between a belief of blind faith and hard facts becomes of paramount importance which can be achieved by staying vigilant and questioning everything around oneself. One cannot afford to forget to keep asking "why" and trust scientific data and studies to avoid god-men like Father Paneloux add fuel to the fire of anxieties by resorting to victim-blaming. Thirdly, there is no space for heroism in disasters like plagues and wars as the only way to overcome the sense of doom is collective efforts from everyone. This is something that was witnessed during the COVID-19's second wave when India was grappling with a shortage of oxygen supply and people from all walks of life began circulating oxygen leads and SOS on social media for those in distress. An overwhelming picture of humanity aiding each other warmly is the ideal response to any grave situation. Finally, how can one forget Camus: just like the plague in his novel, a pandemic is also a pandemic of the mind where discrimination, segregation and marginalization due to class differences settle in. The masses expect the virus to act rationally in infecting people who either 'deserve it' or 'are prone to it because of their social stand'. But the truth is far from this expectation. Multimillionaire Bollywood celebrities, work-from-home employees and daily wage workers – all stand vulnerable in the face of the Coronavirus who does not discriminate.

6. Conclusion

Nothing speaks more beautifully of humanity's shared struggle and co-operation in the face of the plague than the image of Tarrou and Rieux going for a swim in the Bay of Algiers, in the Mediterranean, taking a moment off their duties and problems "for friendship", as they put it. Contrary to the haunting content of the novel, *The Plague* ends on a note of hope and longing, highlighting the imminent understanding of what life actually is on the edge of the Absurd. Today, as a populist threat such as the novel Coronavirus and nuclear wars haunt humanity one again, *The Plague* works towards restoring humanity and a sense of belonging while also issuing a warning against such horrific events, which never truly go away but also do not come as a surprise to anyone – except the unprepared.

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Bio-note

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