

**Albert Camus' "The Plague" and the Absurdity of
Existence in the Pandemic Years**

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by

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work presented in the dissertation entitled “Albert Camus’ *The Plague* and the absurdity of existence in the pandemic years” being submitted to the Department of English, School of Languages, Doon University, Dehradun for the award of Bachelors in English is my original research work.

The dissertation embodies the results of investigations, observations, and experiments carried out by me. I have neither plagiarized any part of the dissertation nor have submitted same work for the award of any other degree/diploma anywhere.

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Certificate

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled, “Albert Camus' *The Plague* and the absurdity of existence in the pandemic years,” submitted by Vaishnavi Rana has been done under my supervision. It is also certified that the work in this dissertation embodies original research and hard work of the candidate.

The assistance and support received during the course of investigation and all the sources of literature have been fully acknowledged.

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Acknowledgment

The following dissertation has been one of the first research work undertaken by me in the academic field. Completing this dissertation has been a herculean task but it made me realize that anything is possible if only one puts their mind to it.

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Abstract

This dissertation deals with the study and comparison of the tragic events in a fictional work with a real-world situation i.e., the Covid pandemic. The research work aims to analyze human behavioral tendencies from an absurdist perspective. It also focuses on the sense of loss and purposelessness experienced by the people due to the pandemic, both in the text and in reality. The main text at hand is *The Plague*, an English translation of the French novel, *Le Peste* by Albert Camus. Another novel, *The Stranger*, by the same writer has also been utilized in some capacity to give better support to Camus' theory of Absurdism. Past journals, articles, and research papers have been carefully utilized to aid with the research. Additionally, interviews of people who have witnessed the pandemic have also been studied and made use of. The research aims to further the Absurdist theory of Albert Camus and analyze the effect of a tragedy as mammoth in magnitude as a pandemic on the consciousness of the people.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The ABCs of Absurdism

Human beings are born in a universe that does not even acknowledge their existence. The fact that human beings have nothing/no one to rely on becomes the cause of great anxiety and anger as they must navigate their way in a universe that provides no answer. With this indifference, comes freedom. They are free to create their meaning. When creating their own meaning, the individuals who diverge from their society's set of rules to avoid bad faith feel alienated. Here, bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) is the condition wherein human beings deceive themselves by giving in to the pressures of society in order to fit in. It becomes clear that it's entirely absurd that we, as human beings, are thrown into existence in a meaningless universe with no one to rely on. But the only way to live authentically is by accepting the absurdity of the human condition and creating our own meaning.

According to Albert Camus, the writer of *Le Peste*, the only way to live authentically is by accepting the absurdity of human existence. A pioneer in Absurdism, he defines 'the absurd' as the conflict between the human tendency to seek meaning in life and the responding meaninglessness of the universe. In his book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus says that one must imagine Sisyphus happy as he has accepted the absurdity of his punishment that will go on for an eternity.

People continue to contemplate the point of their existence and everyone comes up with a different answer. In times of distress, like a pandemic perhaps, it becomes even clearer that

there might not be a point to our universe and that we have the sole responsibility for our happiness. Absurdism has its origin in the journals and existential works of the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, wherein he defines 'The Absurd' by writing, "You cannot act and yet here is where I have to act" (Kierkegaard 2).

A century later, philosopher and author Albert Camus built upon the ideas of Kierkegaard and brought them to the forefront. In his work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus calls absurdity a 'divorce' between two ideals; the human tendency to seek meaning in life versus the deafening silence rewarded by a meaningless universe. It is only through acceptance of the absurd, that an individual can live authentically. He rejects suicide by calling it a mere way to get out of this realm and even faith, which he calls a philosophical suicide, which is even more absurd. Absurdism shares some features with both Existentialism and Nihilism but then it also differs from them in many aspects. Like Existentialism, it accepts the fact that individuals can create their own meaning in life but then it goes on to say that any meaning created is nullified by the ultimate death of the individual. Regarding nihilism, the only similarity is the fact that both accept there is no inherent value of existence.

Aim of the Research

Albert Camus was a French philosopher, attributed with the writing of *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Fall*, and *The Rebel*. Camus became the second youngest recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature in the year 1957. Majorly known for his widely famous philosophy of Absurdism, Albert Camus contemplated the absence of a predestined meaning of life and the freedom it brought with it in his books.

As a fellow witness of the Covid pandemic, I want to see how it has affected the consciousness of the people and still continues to do so. In this research, I plan to analyse the

absurdist theory as proposed by Albert Camus in relation with his novel, *The Plague* and how it compares to the current situation of the 21st century.

As the pandemic continues to come back in phases, any research done in the past two years would not be exhaustive and thus there is scope for more research, which is what I plan to do. The objective of this research is to observe and find real patterns in human behaviour as seen during an epidemic or a pandemic. To analyse the absurdism theory of Albert Camus as found in his novel, *The Plague*.

Research Methodology

In this dissertation, I have tried to explain the effect of a tragedy on the human mind. The way, as human beings, we fall back into self-destructive patterns and try to scratch at the wound to make it last longer. The pandemic of 2020 made us realize the importance of being kind to our loved ones and how little time we have with them.

In chapter 1, I have given a description of the absurdist theory of Albert Camus and also given a brief background of the author.

In chapter 2, the dissertation deals with a brief history of plagues and how they have affected human beings through time immemorial. Then I have given a brief background of the coronavirus pandemic that gripped the nation in the year 2020. The book at hand has been also discussed in the further section. The last section uncovers the way human beings experience pain and suffering. It is unique how everyone experiences pain and deals with it.

The last section deals with the conclusion that there is a plague of suffering in all of us and that we must be very careful not to pass it onto others.

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Chapter 2

A Brief History of Plague and Comparison of *The Plague* with The Real Pandemic

A brief history of plagues

After four years, the first pandemic wave of plague started to disappear from Europe, but pouches of the illness persisted and remote local occurrences persisted until the second pandemic emerged in the late 1500s. A more deadly strain of the disease appeared during the second pandemic, which devastated France and claimed 2.5 million lives between 1600 and 1670. England, Holland, and Italy were all affected by epidemics. Before the Great Fire of London, in 1665–1666, London saw its most recent significant outbreak.

By the 1930s, *The Plague* was no longer an epidemic. The disease is still present in a few minuscule pockets throughout the world, particularly in central Asia. Epidemics of *The Plague* had disappeared by the 1930s. There are still a few tiny areas of persistence around the world, especially in central Asia where the illness is widespread.

The mortality rate has decreased from almost 60% to 11% thanks to current antibiotics. On the island of Madagascar, however, drug-resistant strains of the bacteria were discovered in 1995. The deadliest outbreak in recent times struck the island in 2017, where it killed 170 people and infected hundreds more.

Scientists have been able to pinpoint the precise strains of bubonic plague they meet and their origins using methods like genome mapping, making it simpler to follow the progress of epidemics. Additionally, it has been established that the Black Death was, in almost all cases, bubonic plague, all thanks to genetic evidence of the *Yersinia pestis* bacteria in various plague burial cemeteries from 1348 to 1590.

The historical plague epidemics serve as a reminder of the social and medical effects of epidemics. Many of the innovations they spurred on the fight against infectious diseases are still in use today. The persistence of the bubonic plague, however, serves as an *aidemémoire* that epidemics are not yet a thing of the past.

The most serious pandemic in recent memory was the influenza pandemic of 1918. It was brought on by an H1N1 virus with avian genes. Although the origin of the virus is a subject of debate, it spread globally between 1918 and 1919. It was originally discovered in military soldiers in the US in the spring of 1918.

One-third of the world's populace, or roughly 500 million people, are thought to have contracted this virus. At least 50 million deaths were thought to have occurred globally, with 675,000 of those deaths taking place in the United States. Younger than 5-year-olds, those in their 20s to 40s, and those 65 and above had higher mortality rates.

Although the 1918 H1N1 virus has been analysed and synthesised, little is known about the characteristics that made it so deadly. Control efforts around the globe were restricted to non-medical interventions like isolation, quarantine, hygiene, practicing disinfectants, and restricting public gatherings, applied haphazardly, as there was no vaccine to prevent influenza infection and no antibiotics to treat secondary bacterial infections that can be connected with influenza infections.

The Ganges delta in India served as cholera's primary reservoir before it began to spread over the world in the 19th century. Millions of people died from six consecutive pandemics on all continents. Beginning in South Asia in 1961, the pandemic spread to Africa in 1971 and continued its way to the Americas in 1991. Today, Cholera is endemic in several nations.

The Black Death was most likely the first epidemic to be noted. The Silk Road took around four years to travel from the Central Asian Steppes to the Crimea to the westernmost

regions of the Middle East, Europe, and North Africa. One to two-thirds of the people were reportedly wiped out in Europe alone. Many communities were first exposed to the sickness and were unsure of how to react.

A number of cases were being treated by health authorities in Wuhan, China, on December 31. A novel virus that had infested scores of people in Asia was discovered a few days later by experts in China. There was no proof of the virus's easy human transmission at the time. Chinese health officials said they were keeping an eye on it to stop the outbreak from getting worse.

According to the W.H.O.'s initial situation assessment, the first confirmed cases outside of mainland China occurred in Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. The following day, a man in his 30s from Washington State became the first verified case in the country after returning from a vacation to Wuhan with symptoms.

The World Health Organization formally declared a public health emergency of worldwide concern amid the thousands of new cases in China. The W.H.O. and other nations will continue to collaborate with China to protect public health, according to a spokeswoman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry. The U.S. State Department advised tourists to stay away from China.

As the figure of confirmed cases in Italy increased from fewer than five to more than 150, Europe had its first significant outbreak. Officials in the Lombardy region shut down 10 villages after a dramatic rise in cases was noticed in Codogno, southeast of Milan. Sports and cultural events were postponed, and schools were shuttered.

European leaders decided to ban practically all tourists from the rest of the globe for at least 30 days in at least 26 countries. The European Union's first concerted response to the pandemic was the restriction on all but necessary travel from outside the bloc.

The next day after the government stopped all domestic flights, India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, issued a 21-day lockdown order. The prime minister promised to devote nearly \$2 billion on medical equipment, isolation rooms, ventilators, and training for medical staff, despite the fact that there were only about 500 cases in India that had been documented.

According to data gathered by The New York Times on April 26, the coronavirus pandemic has sickened more than 2.8 million people worldwide and killed more than 200,000 individuals. India reached one million reported illnesses and 25,000 fatalities on July 17. The unfortunate numbers reached their peak at a time when several states and localities had reinstated complete and partial lockdowns and when the nation was third in the world in terms of infections, after the United States and Brazil. Researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology predicted that by the close of next year, India would have the worst rate of infections in the entire globe, despite the fact that the number of cases there was still rising.

In just three months, Covid-19's mortality toll had doubled from half a million to one million worldwide. Nearly 23 million people have recovered from Covid-19, out of a total of approximately 33 million cases worldwide.

The Plague

A fictitious description of the abrupt appearance and spread of the plague in the Algerian town, Oran is found in Albert Camus' 1947 book *Le Peste*, also known as *The Plague*. The pandemic, which lasts for roughly a year, disrupts and disturbs the lives and mental state of its residents, much like the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020. Through this book, Camus compels himself to investigate the cause of the intense suffering and fragility at the core of our existence.

However, *The Plague*, which was written after France had been invaded, is also a metaphor for the suffocation of human freedom within and by a political philosophy devoted to

the deliberate annihilation of the other. It serves as a symbol for both fascism and the complicity, passivity, and resignation that accept death.

The section that follows discusses the alienation that comes with the quarantine of the city, as well as the degradation of speech and the loss of nostalgia as a source for ethical challenge, risk, or present transformation.

How easily our deepest fears and concerns can be used against us is demonstrated by Camus' exploration of the societal and mental alterations of independence under any contagious or dictatorial control. However, the effects cannot be dealt with through apathy, indifference, or normalising their existence. According to Camus, the moral imperative is our capacity to recognise a plague when it arises, understand that its repercussions will be catastrophic, and realise that we will continue to experience it long after it has passed. The death it causes shouldn't leave us unfazed; else, we wouldn't have the option to rebel against it. According to Tarrou in the book, we are all infected with the plague. No one is immune, and in order to avoid falling prey to it, we must always be on the lookout so that we don't "find ourselves breathing in another person's face and infecting him." (Camus 145).

The plot revolves around a coastal town in Algeria that is being attacked by an unknown plague. But the allegory functions on a number of levels. It is a story about an epidemic, a representation of Nazi occupation, and, finally, a concrete example of a metaphysical issue, according to Camus.

The latter point is particularly important right now. The inescapable reality of suffering is the 'metaphysical dilemma.' It is problematic because there isn't a solid justification for it. Like the disease, it simply occurs in the world whether we want it to. In his book, Camus explores the possibility of turning suffering into something positive by asking if we may think of it as a shared experience rather than a personal burden.

Suffering and the path beyond it

Realizing the commonality of pain is crucial. A plague is a rare occurrence, and the horror it causes is also rare. However, suffering is not at all extraordinary. When you leave the house every day, bad things could happen. You might suddenly get fatally ill. Everyone you know experiences the same thing. We are all held captive by forces outside of our control.

Simply said, a pandemic brings to light what is already true about our situation. Additionally, it makes us consider our duties to those in our immediate vicinity. The tension between personal fulfilment and moral duty is vividly illustrated by *The Plague*. A dedicated doctor by the name of Rieux is the story's protagonist. What each character in the story does when the scourge arrives defines them. Everyone suffers, but those who can lessen other people's suffering are the only people who are truly happy. In *The Plague*, the true antagonists are the ones who are too self-absorbed to look beside themselves. Even during these tough times, these types of people spend their energy on making others suffer. An attitude of solidarity is entirely alien to them since they are unable to see that their plight is shared. And because of that blindness, true community is impossible.

The idea that a horrendous tragedy will always ensue chaos recurs throughout *The Plague*. Almost everything we take for granted is disrupted by it. Additionally, it forces us to focus on the here and now. Other than ensuring your daily survival, nothing else truly counts. As Rieux puts it, "We're all implicated in it" (Camus 146).

'The Big One' is not the coronavirus. We will not be destroyed by it. However, it will call for the kind of unity that our individual tendencies reject.

In the last sentences of his novel, Camus mixes his philosophy:

And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperilled. He knew what those jubilant

crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city. (Camus 150)

This last sentence is of great importance. Suffering never truly ends. The Coronavirus coming back in more severe waves proved it all. Everything that afflicts people will return, even the plague. However, the book's main argument is that the very existence of community depends on a common fight.

The Plague teaches us to view ourselves as communal members rather than as isolated individuals. Because of this, we must consider others as well as ourselves when considering our level of "preparedness." It entails viewing risk as more than just a numerical calculation.

Even if it is dreadful, a pandemic brings our interconnectedness to light in a manner that only catastrophe can. *The Plague's* charm lies in how it challenges the reader to apply the pandemic's lessons to daily life. Empathy, love, and solidarity are the three values that underpin the hero, Rieux, and which also make all societies desirable. But Rieux's greatest quality is that he always tells the truth. He seeks to create a perfect analogy between the spoken word and the outside world.

His morals are further complicated by his conviction that, even though there is no real hope for humanity, he still has to do his job. He says, "I just need to do the best job possible" (Illing 30).

So, here is a person whose primary responsibility is saving lives. Then there is the journalist Rambert persona, who travels to Algeria to write a piece about the Arabs and Berbers.

Rambert is devastated when the city is shut down because he is a native of Paris. He wants to go back because his lover resides there. He therefore looks for various means of getting out of the city. He also visits Rieux as soon as the quarantine is announced and requests a medical permit from him certifying his health and his ability to go to Paris. When Rieux replies that it is not under his control to give that to him, a frustrated Rambert points out that he doesn't belong here.

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Chapter 3

Conclusion

One day in the courtroom, when his father, a magistrate, demanded the death penalty for this small individual, the entire situation looked far and abstract to the boy. Tarrou could only stare

at this man and see in him what the others could not see. His tie, his fingernails, and his odd face. However, nobody else is observing him in that manner. They perceive him as an abstract, non-human form. So Tarrou says, “At that moment, I realized we’re all carrying the plague, and that we have to be as careful as possible not to breathe it on one another” (Illing)

This is a metaphor for the inherent hurt and grief everyone keeps inside them. The real absurdity of existence. We are all carrying the plague. We are all carrying some type of suffering inside us. We do not need to give it to others. But in the end, the cycle continues. Perhaps this is the true absurdity of life.

But there is still hope. There is always hope. The cycle can end with one individual. This is also what Camus says about the freedom that comes with the silence of the universe. Human beings are free to choose kindness over hurt. Free to choose forgiveness over hurt.

Camus spent his life witnessing the horrors of the war. The everlasting pain it inflicted on the people of his country. The countless children dying and suffering because of it. His own life was complicated with a throng of failed love stories. Lost love would make anyone an absurdist.

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