

Human Response to Epidemic: A Re-reading of The Plague by Albert Camus in the Light of Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Human response to public health crisis is the theme of many literary workings ranging from Homer to Thomas Mann and Kafka. The history of Western literature is the history of pandemic literature also, although the renewed interest is due to the global pandemic Scenario. The lessons that novel *The Plague* taught us and the Pandemic Covid-19 taught us is never to be forgotten. In the history of mankind, we may find other pestilences repeating itself and the lessons learned are very valuable.

Key Words: Pandemic, Epidemic, Covid-19, Pestilence

Date of Submission: 15-05-2022

Date of Acceptance: 30-05-2022

Human response to public health crisis is the theme of many literary workings ranging from Homer to Thomas Mann and Kafka. The history of Western literature is the history of pandemic literature also, although the renewed interest is due to the global pandemic Scenario. The narrative dealing with diseases even had a cathartic effect in Greek period, as in the Oedipus's Story. From Biblical stories of pestilence to present day contemporary literature, there are many narratives dealing with the theme of diseases.

Pandemic literature gives us an idea of how people reacted to diseases in the past. The medical perspectives have lost the relevance because of the advancements in science. But it is interesting to note that the psychological response over the centuries have remained the same. The work *Decameron* (1353) by Boccaccio is written in the background of Black Death. The narrative is about ten people engaged in story telling during the pandemic, which has a therapeutic effect. The growing tendency of man to tell stories about Covid-19 can also be read from this point of view. People's growing interest in Pandemic related stories in the wake of lockdown show how the modern man is also a slave to ancient fears.

The 20th century classic *The Plague* (French *La Peste*) by Albert Camus is a novel about a plague epidemic in the Algerian city of Oran. It brings out the dilemmas that a pandemic like plague can bring to a society. The story is narrated by an unknown narrator. It is also an allegory of France under Nazi occupation. Harold Bloom in his Biography of Camus writes "...it can be interpreted at more than one level. It is a metaphysical play whose symbols relate to the eternal predicament of man in the face of evil and death. It may be read as a symbolical account of an enemy occupation in time of war or as a more general protest against totalitarian systems" (126). To read the novel in the pandemic looming world of Covid 19 is like reliving the experience psychologically. Set in North African coastal city of Oran, the narrative brings into focus the response of a cross-section of people to the epidemic of plague. It includes priest, doctor, poor, man and woman. The powerlessness of individuals in the wake of epidemics is very beautifully brought out in the story. Illness as a metaphor looms throughout the story.

One is reminded of Susan Sontag's very famous work *Illness as Metaphor* that, "Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick (Sontag 3). According to Harold Bloom "*The Plague*...", like other novel, it can be interpreted at more than one level. It is a metaphysical play whose symbols relate to the eternal predicament of man in the face of evil and death. It may be read as a symbolic account of an enemy occupation in time of war or as more general protest against totalitarian system (Bloom 126).

The unreal that we experience when we are confined or quarantined to the house due to pandemic is well brought out in the novel *The Plague*. Even the existence of nature seems to be unreal. "In the Plague one of the consequences of the epidemic is the closing of the beaches and bathing pools of Oran. Maritime traffic ceases completely and the port is deserted, cordoned-off by military pickets. Hence, although the sea is there, it

exists in the background and, as the plague increases in severity, the presence of the sea becomes less and less real in the minds of the inhabitants of the town” (Bloom 125). The novel should also be read from the point of view of absurdist ideology that Camus believed in, a world devoid of meaning other than human action. Universe devoid of inherent meaning and life as a mystery beyond human comprehension. It is interesting to note that in order to write the novel Camus studied the history of plagues and pestilences. The scientific precision with which he deals with the theme is a witness to his erudite nature.

It is interesting to draw parallels in the behaviour of human being at the time of pestilence whether in 18th century or 21st . Some have the false notion that they are immune to such diseases; world leader flouting the mask wearing culture is a good example. The people in Oran where the story of *The Plague* unfolds had similar response. One of the characters remarks about the disease “It’s unthinkable. Everyone knows it’s ceased to appear in Western Europe,” (33) to which Dr. Rieux replies “Yes, everyone knew that-except the dead men” (33). The story is slowly developed and the narration is realist. The starting of the plague is described thus, “on the morning of 16 April, Dr. Bernard Rieux felt something soft under his foot. It was a dead rat lying in the middle of the landing” (Camus 5). How the event develops into an epidemic is beautifully brought out in the novel:

The local Press, so lavish of news about the rats, now had nothing to say. For rats die in the street; men in their homes. And newspapers are concerned only with the street. Meanwhile, Government and municipal officials were putting their heads together. So long as each individual doctor had come across only two or three cases, no one had thought of taking action. But it was merely a matter of adding up the figures and, once this had been done, the total was startling. In a very few days the number of cases had risen by leaps and bounds, and it became evident to all observers of this strange malady that a real epidemic had set in (Camus 33).

Dr. Rieux is the first one to realise what it is without the results of post-mortems and he says “Well, I know. And I don’t need any post-mortems. I was in China for a good part of my career, and I saw some cases in Paris twenty years ago” (Camus 33). The reference to China may be accident, but highly evocative when we trace it back to the same place as many number of pandemics originated from there. The disbelief of the present population to recognise the reality behind the epidemic is very much same to the reaction of the people in Oran. “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 head from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise” (35). Dr. Rieux is a representative of the logical man who is hunting for question and answers at the time of great suffering, he has a pessimist in him, but he is at the same time holds a scientific temper which is lacking even for the modern man.

The two and half year-old pandemic period is getting over and the world has returned to new normal, but the lessons that novel *The Plague* taught us and the Pandemic Covid-19 taught us is never to be forgotten. In the history of mankind we may find other pestilences repeating itself and the lessons learned are very valuable.

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Dr. Lima Antony. “Human Response to Epidemic: A Re-reading of The Plague by Albert Camus in the Light of Covid-19 Pandemic.” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 27(05), 2022, pp. 05-06.