Albert Camus’ The Plague: A Celebration of Life for Life's Sake

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Abstract

Life and death are the only ultimate truth in this world. One who is born is destined to die after completing the given course of time. There is a huge gap between these two poles called life and death. During the journey from one to another, Human beings are compelled to cultivate some habits that help in passing this journey. It is absurd because the end is certain and everybody is fated to face it as it can't be prevented at any cost. Life is all about filling this huge rift between the two real forces. When a self is created, from that very moment it starts an excursion towards the ultimate truth called Death which is the end of this worldly adventure. It seems unreasonable when people aspire to conquer this world despite knowing that their life can be snatched at any time. Albert Camus, a French existentialist, famous for one of his best novels The Plague, proposes three ways to approach this absurdity of life- suicide, faith and acceptance. He asserts that suicide and faith can be considered an escape from life. When we have faith in something we stop using logic and argument seems pointless. So, these two- suicide and faith fail to solve the mysteries of life. But acceptance is more powerful because it leads to individual freedom. People become free from moral judgements in life and create a new meaning out of this dark and gloomy world. Even though life is purposeless, it is worth living and should be embraced as it is. This paper attempts to explore Camus' vision of life and why it should be celebrated against all the hardships. This paper also examines how adversity unites the whole of humanity during disasters like pandemic.

Keywords: Pandemic, Convid-19, Life, Sin, Death, Happiness, Absurd, Existentialism

Millions of people lost their lives due the Covid and the rest are still suffering and facing it. Whether young, old or infant all are the victims of cruel death caused by the sudden outburst of the pandemic. Therefore, the whole of humanity has been devastated and shaken up. People have been witnessing the naked dance of death by hunger and due to the lack of proper medication and unavailability of medical equipment. Dead bodies were first cremated by medical staff in the absence of the families concerned in the name of
infectious disease. Not only this, bodies were seen floating in the river as symmetries were full and there was no place for more dead ones. This whole scenario during the pandemic has questioned the meaning and purpose of the Life. Several questions pop up in our minds-What is life? Is it all about getting birth and then to die? Is there anything beyond this mundane and humdrum Cycle? People have become agitated and miserable after experiencing these heart wrenching scenes and have been shattered. Is this the only reason people are here then? After going through an adverse time, people are filled with a sense of frustration and nihilism. Then the question is, what is the solution to these indifferences towards living life? Why one should not surrender before these fatal calamities? These questions and their relevant answers are crucial for human existence.

The remedy for these haunting qualms is leading the life in whatever condition it is. One can't prevent things from happening. What is bound to happen will happen, no one has the power to stop it and if one tries to do, it comes with disastrous consequences. Melting glaciers are the concern of the world today, natural catastrophes are reoccurring so frequently, death rates by all means going high, people are being mentally ill more like never before and no one can stop these from happening. People have to learn to live with it. Because life is about searching for a cause to survive and a reason to not surrender in any condition. These are the realities of life. Therefore, it should be accepted that life is not about only happiness or only grief and suffering. It's an amalgamation of both or can be said more suffering and pain than love and joy. Happiness is like an interlude in the drama of life. Victorian writer Thomas Hardy says "Life is an occasional episode in the general drama of pain." It means life has more suffering and misery than pleasure and joy. Contentment and amusement are episodic and short-lived. So for the sake of that short relaxation, joy and satisfaction, one should never surrender before this deadly disaster. Life should be lived for life's sake only, not for any greater or lower cause. The Almighty has finished his task by giving us life, now it's people's job to lead this life with hope and desire. This philosophy of leading life at any cost is the core of Albert Camus's writings, primarily The Plague, his most acclaimed novel. This paper analyses the relevance of Camus's philosophy in today's perspective. He has written many novels on the theme of the meaninglessness of life. The feeling of loss and unbearable suffering has been the scary reality of Camus' world but he has also shown a ray of hope by being a rebel against these calamities. David Bellos, a professor at Princeton University, writes about The Plague, "It shows what it means to resist, not just a foreign invader, but incomprehensible evil in whatever form it may manifest itself. And it says: good men-just men- do what they can, and they can do a great deal."

Albert Camus, a French philosopher, author and journalist, has written many realistic fictions including "The Strangers", "The Fall", "The Rebel", and "The Myth of Sisyphus" which are acclaimed worldwide. These novels introduce the theme of existential crises, dilemmas of life and death, and accepting the circle of grief and happiness. He was influenced by philosophers like Fredrick Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Kierkegaard and Karl Marx. He was also associated with literary schools like Continental philosophy, Absurdism, Existentialism and Existential anarchism.
The Plague was published in French as “La Peste” in the year 1947. Later it was translated into English in 1948. In this novel, so many themes are layered so it is quite difficult to come up with a final interpretation. In this novel, exile, separation, solidarity, rebellion, death, and calamity are some prevailing ideas of the book. The story of The Plague is set in the early 1940s in a fictionalized town of Oran on the Algerian coast and it begins in April when Oran witnesses the outbreak of a deadly pandemic. First of all people of the town start observing the unprecedented death of rats, coming from sewers and drains. The number of dying rats jumps from hundreds to thousands within days. After the authorities send scavengers to clean the heap of dead rats, townsfolk think it’s all over but soon people themselves start getting sick with high fever and some peculiar symptoms. It seems like people have taken charge of dying rats. After pondering over the nature and seriousness of the plague and its bizarre symptoms, the magistrate of the town M. Othon, doctor Bernard Rieux and his colleagues Mr Castel and Richard called this disease by its real name, plague. Initially, people went through a state of denial. Witnessing heart-wrenching deaths and not being able to meet their loved ones make them restless. Town gates were locked and entering the town was prohibited as there was a chance of viruses entering in the town with people. All of a sudden plague becomes the part of everyone’s conversation. Fear was seen in the eyes of innocent citizens. Camus says that

"Pestilence is so common, there have been as many plagues in the world as there have been wars, yet plagues and wars always find people equally unprepared. When war breaks out people say 'it won't last, it is too stupid. And war is certainly too stupid, but that does not prevent it from lasting."

(The Plague, p. 35)

Dr Bernard Rieux, Jean Tarrou, Raymond Rambert and Joseph Grand are some prominent characters who experience the plague in the story. We see that Albert Camus portrays the concept of life, death and hope so beautifully through these characters. Life is about losing and getting it back. It is never entirely black or white but an amalgamation of both. Dr Rieux is a doctor by profession in his thirties. His wife is sick and sent to a sanatorium for better and a speedy recovery. When Oran is attacked by the plague, Dr Rieux is the only hope for the crying and dying ones. He goes door to door and treats plague-stricken patients. Dr Rieux says in this novel that

"You could not waste your time on it. The thing was to do your job as it should be done." (The Plague, p. 39)

Apart from Dr Rieux, who also runs an auxiliary hospital and works long hours treating plague bound people, some other characters are also significant in the novel like Raymond Rambert, Jean Tarrou, Joseph Grand, Cottard, Father Paneloux and the magistrate M.Othon. However, some other minor characters like the Prefect, Dr Castle, and Dr Richard, also have major contributions to the story. As the story proceeds and the plague spreads its legs in the city, they confront the different stages of the plague and feel the fear. Firstly, we see that Jean Tarrou, a visitor to the Oran, gets captured in the city due to the plague. He is a happy man, always smiling and noting down everything happening around him in his diary. Spanish dancers and musicians are his source of entertainment. We come to know that his diary helps the narrator to add others' perspectives and experiences regarding the pandemic and thus this brings objectivity to the novel. In the
beginning, Tarrou thinks that he doesn't belong to Oran and ignores the seriousness of the situation. Soon he realized the need for human power to combat the plague and he makes 'sanitary squads' following his 'codes of morals'. He says that the plague is everyone's business and all should cooperate to conquer it. He says

"...Plague was everyone's business and everyone should do his duty. For instance, any able-bodied man was welcome in the sanitary squads." (The Plague, p. 152)

Tarrou believes that helping human beings in adversity is his moral duty and this is a great way of becoming a Saint without having faith in God. While talking to Rieux, he says "... all who, while unable to be saints, but refusing to bow down to pestilence, strive to be healers." Like Tarrou, Raymond Rambert is an outsider too. Being a journalist by profession he comes to Oran city to see the living standard of the people of the Arab Colonies. He does everything and follows legal and illegal procedures to escape and meet his fiancée who resides in Paris but fails. His friendship with Dr Rieux, Grand and Tarrou grows eventually and he understands the demand of plague. He goes through a change of heart and joins the sanitary squads at last. Before joining the company, Rambert also believes that he can't die serving deceased people because he has to live for his lady love for the rest of his life and for that he must be alive and after all, he is not responsible for the outburst of the plague. Arguing with Rieux he says that he can't die for an idea like heroism and humanism like others but Dr makes him understand things clearly and says

"I must tell you, there is 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 fighting a plague is - common decency." (The Plague, p. 158)

Later Rambert realizes that the plague can't be defeated by escaping it. There must be a duel between both, the rebellious nature of men and women or the destructive nature of the plague. Life is not given to us to surrender, to get defeated so easily. We must rebel before that final call "Death". He says

"I have seen what I have seen, I know that I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody's business." (The Plague, p. 199)

We are never prepared for disasters like earthquakes, storms, and pandemics. It appears all of sudden. The people of Oran were stunned by the sudden appearance of the plague. It was quite hard for them to accept the occurrence of this deadly disease and even name this a "plague". In an official meeting of the people in power, it was discussed whether this infection is a plague or anything else. The prefect of the town asks Dr Rieux

"But I shall need your professional declaration that the pandemic is one of the plagues." Dr Rieux replies that. The truth is that our colleague is convinced its plague; his description of the syndrome proves it." (The Plague, p. 48)

Once the explosion of the plague is officially declared and authority records a sudden huge death rate, its impact on the human psyche was heavy and depressing. It was a moment of existential crisis. Camus writes that
“At such moments the collapse of their courage, will-power and endurance was so abrupt that they felt they could never drag themselves out of the pit of despond into which they had fallen.” (The Plague, p. 58)

After the eruption of the plague, the picture of Oran city becomes too gloomy and miserable. Mid of August can be marked as the climax of the plague as it has destroyed everything and everyone. Town folks were imbued with a sense of exile and deprivation. The narrator says that people were able to hear the ambulance horn the whole night. Shortage of coffins, winding sheets and lack of space in the cemetery was a new reality in Oran during the pandemic, something we faced during the Covid-19 in 2020. Due to the scarcity of coffins, people started sharing them. The condition gets the worst as the hospitals and cemetery were full of bodies, waiting for their numbers to be buried. This whole scene shattered the hope and heart of the people of Oran fighting with plague from the front. Pandemic has a symbolic significance. It prepares us for the uncertainties of life. We never know what is next coming to us and always dream of everything fair and pleasant. But that’s the dream only. One has to be acquainted with the black and murky side of the life too. Camus instructs us to be rebels and fighters in this absurd journey of life. As Robert Browning says that “I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more, The best and the last! ”This philosophy is the only mantra for leading a life for the life’s sake only.

Albert Camus has shown that insanity, meaninglessness and calamities are part of our lives and can't be overcome by a negative approach. Dr Rieux talks to Father Paneloux and says that

“They were worried and irritated - but there are not feelings with which to confront plague.”
(The Plague, p. 73)

As survivors of the Covid-19 and readers of The Plague, we see that pandemic, a powerful destroyer of humanity, brings humans near to the God. First people surrender themselves to God and ask for pardon for their known or unknown sins. In this novel, Father Paneloux is a renowned priest who calls a congregation and gives a powerful sermon and says that the plague is the punishment sent by God for our committed sin. Now it's time for repentance. He says that

“...Despite all the horrors of these dark days, despite the groans of men and women in agony, our fellow-citizens would offer up to heaven that one prayer which is truly Christian, a prayer of love. And God would see to the rest.” (The Plague, p. 95)

Seeing an innocent lad dying with so much anguish breaks the heart into pieces. It causes the collapse of faith, love and trust in the Almighty. As the observers of the Covid-19, we saw lots of people crying for help and perishing each moment. Even hospitals and vineyards became the witnesses of the horrors of the pandemic. It doesn't spare anyone. It would not be wrong to say that pestilences are a destroyer by nature. In the 1940s too, people saw the world of death and destruction when the sudden outbreak of the virus swept half of the whole population of the world. In The Plague, when the town magistrate M. Othon and his wife...
Mme Othon were in quarantine camps, their only child was in acute pain struggling for life in the city hospital. The boy was infected by the virus and he was at his last stage. Camus writes that

“Tiny half-formed but acutely painful buboes were clogging the joints of the child's puny limbs.

It was a losing fight.” (The Plague, p. 203)

But the will for life was seen in the boy, resisting against every odds. Dr Rieux and his colleague Dr Castle were imbued with remorse for not saving the innocent soul. After feeling the pain of the kid, Father Paneloux prays to his Christian God and says,

“My God, spare this child" (The Plague, p. 206) but who has the power to prevent death from taking lives. The boy dies an unbearable death. The narrator says,

“For it was over. Castle had moved to the other side of the bed and said the end had come. His mouth still gaping, but silent now, the child was lying amongst the tumbled blankets, a small shrunken form, with the tears still wet on his cheeks.” (The Plague, p. 207)

We see that after this incident of the death of the boy, everyone gets devastated. Rieux gets furious as he performs his best to save the magistrate's son but fails. But still, Rieux collects the strength and states that,

“...But weariness is a kind of madness. And there are times when the only feeling I have is one of mad revolt.” (The Plague, p. 208)

It is now evident that it's all about making meaning out of nothing. When the city magistrate M. Othon and his wife come home from the quarantine camp, they decide to go to the camp again for some other reason. Taking leave from the office work, M. Othon decides to serve the plague-stricken people in the quarantine camps as they have witnessed the lack of volunteers there. He asserts that he will feel connected to his beloved son by serving the dying people. Being questioned by Dr Bernard, he says,

"I know it may sound absurd but I'd feel less separated from my little boy." (The Plague, p. 249)

At the end of the novel, Jean Tarrou, a witness and observer of the plague in the Oran, gets caught by the plague himself. As a member of the sanitary squad, he served several people when the plague was at its climax and now he is taken care of by the Dr and his old mother. Dr hides the real issue from Tarrou and promises to cure him for sure. Jean Tarrou shows his great will to live and rebel for his life and put a strong statement when he says

“Thanks. 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 Plague, p. 272)

And that's the zeal to live life demands. After this major incident, the pandemic disappears all of sudden like its appearance in the city. Rieux, the narrator of this novel, says that the townsfolk were looking relaxed now but the scarce and fear were still visible in their eyes. And it was the time of accepting this new
life given to them. It begins with exchanging smiles and warm glances. Running engines start bringing separated families together including Rambert and his beloved wife. Albert Camus shows that the plague comes back and it never disappears forever. In the novel, the people of the Oran city start compromising and decide to lead their life for life only and welcome this change wholeheartedly. Camus ends this novel on an optimistic note by saying

“Nestling to each other, they went to their homes, blind to the outside world and seemingly triumphant over the plague, forgetting every sadness and the plight of those who had come by the same train and found no one awaiting them...” (The Plague, p. 284)

So, now, it can be said that every incident in this novel is tragic and brings a lot of things to the table to discuss together. Therefore, it’s crucial to understand the significance of life in the context of both the plague and the Covid-19 both. Pandemic teaches us the purpose of life because people searching for oxygen cylinders, basic medicine and food and milk realized that nothing in this world is greater than health. It is truly said that "health is wealth" and being alive is the greatest blessing on this earth. Not surprisingly, we live in a society where people aspire for a grand lifestyle, luxury accessories, a great political career or worldwide fame for their religious or social beliefs and people also saw these fancy dreams beings shattered due to the pandemic. Therefore, we witness people coming forth to help others and saving perishing souls. Albert Camus seems to believe in the idea of celebrating life and serving human lives when Rieu says,

"Salvation much too big word for me. I don't aim so high. I'm concerned with man's health and for me, his health comes first." (The Plague, p. 209)

Life comes first, that's all. People realised that life is given to them as a blessing and it's more than any treasure or achievement. Life should be celebrated. It should be enjoyed and the beings alive are the reason itself to applaud it.

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