

REVISITING ALBERT CAMUS' 'THE PLAGUE' AND ITS PRESCIENT HUMAN RESILIENCE AMID COVID-19

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Abstract

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a reminiscent unfolding account of precarious human resilience and survival in the 21st century as depicted in Albert Camus' classical novel The Plague. The novel in which Albert narrates the massive plague that devastated the residents of Algeria's Oran, a North African Coastal Town in the twentieth century and the community's attempted resistance against the evil, is a classical example of the struggle to curtail the current pandemic that has wreaked havoc across all States in the world. Just like the narration in The Plague, COVID-19 is a horrendous transmissible disease that the universe has thrown on humans and man is unable to sustain its measure. The pandemic has not only colonized people's lifestyles but also condemned both its innocent and guilty victims six feet under. Quarantine, isolation, fear, uncertainty, compassion and contact tracing as a result to COVID-19 has compelled individuals to psychologically respond in their own way to the pandemic in order to survive: some are busy blaming the government and its health officials, some sleep peacefully in their beds, some have resigned themselves to the fate, and a few are struggling to avert the evil but, the plague has proofed to be a great equalizer. It is therefore remarkable to say that Albert is astonishingly prescient in his depiction of a city under siege from a severe infection. His view to take up the fight is much better as it is the only bullet left to confront death in order to survive. This paper will consider the current pandemic as revisited through the lens of Albert's classical novel The Plague. A concise literature review and prologue on to the use of motif in the novel plot will reveal novel functions and forms of the pandemic. The structure and narrative account will illustrate the existence of absurdity amid the pandemic in the perspective of death anxiety. Moreover, ethical, allegoric, imagery and thematic queries that will eventually recreate a visual discourse of COVID-19 will be undertaken. Besides, the paper will argue the literal as well as the literary post COVID-19 in its conclusion.

Key words: Human resilience, COVID-19, Separation, Plague, Equalizer

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1. INTRODUCTION:

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) also referred to as the 'twenty first century plague' is one among several types of viruses that cause terminal diseases (Sauer, 2020).¹ The virus which has greatly reset and almost halted the world economy has led to a reminiscent unfolding account of precarious human resilience and survival in the 21st century as depicted in Albert Camus' classical novel *The Plague*. The novel in which Albert narrates the massive plague that devastated the residents of Algeria's Oran, a North African Coastal Town in the twentieth century² and the community's attempted resistance against the evil, is a classical example of the struggle to curtail the current pandemic that has wreaked havoc across all States in the world (Metcalf 2020).

Just like the narration in *The Plague*, COVID-19 is a horrendous transmissible disease that the universe has thrown on humans and man is unable to sustain its measure. The pandemic has not only colonized people's lifestyles but also condemned both its innocent and guilty victims six feet under. The geometric progression of the virus has over the few months produced a steeply rising "death graph" (Kellman, 1993).

En masse quarantine, isolation, fear, uncertainty, compassion and contact tracing as a result to COVID-19 has not only brought to lime light the shortage of lifesaving equipments and medical personnel, but it has compelled individuals to psychologically respond in their own way to the pandemic in order to survive: some are busy blaming the government and its health officials, some sleep peacefully in their beds, some have surrendered themselves to the fate, and a few are struggling to avert the evil but, the plague has proofed to be a great equalizer. The disease has no favourites, everyone is in line to contract it. It is therefore remarkable to say that Albert is astonishingly prescient in his depiction of a city under siege

from a severe infection. His view to take up the fight is much better as it is the only bullet left to confront death in order to survive.

This paper will consider the current pandemic as revisited through the lens of Albert's classical novel *The Plague*. A concise literature review and prologue on to the use of motif in the novel plot will reveal novel functions and forms of the pandemic. The structure and narrative account will illustrate the existence of absurdity amid the pandemic in the perspective of death anxiety. Moreover, ethical, allegoric, imagery and thematic queries that will eventually recreate a visual discourse of COVID-19 will be undertaken. Besides, the paper will argue the literal as well as the literary post COVID-19 in its conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Dating as far as the Old Testament period, the literary world has linked commission of sin by man as the great contributor of plagues⁵ thus exposing the devastating infectious diseases as a direct penalty from God for disobedience.⁶ Literature regularly exposes unmerited human ego that convinces humanity that they are invincible.

Prior to COVID-19, several writers had penned down about world plagues. In 1353, Giovanni Boccaccio wrote the *Decameron*, a masterpiece that lays down an account of three men and seven young women who are forced to self-quarantine at Florence, Italy for two agonizing weeks in order to flee the Black Death of 1348. The detainees are compelled to engage in prayer for an end of the epidemic and story-telling in order to waste their time in a cocooned environment.

In *Decameron*, the ten individual's experience in isolation appears to be like a world collapsing around them. To satisfy their ego, they keep on searching for assurances. They hope to get through the pandemic as it was not the first that has ever cropped up. They also comfort themselves with the fact that the world seemed fundamentally orderly despite the temporal chaos caused by the pandemic and as such life must go on, and that they can partially control the wavering world by engaging themselves in certain basic things.⁹ Giovanni's literary work teaches humanity that their nature is ever-present, similar and extraordinarily resilient and that a pandemic generally brings out the best and worst of humanity. In 2020, the *Decameron* seems extremely relevant decades after its publication.

Commonality of death is one of the things that unite humanity. Thus, the only coping mechanism man has is laughter, the ever best medicine.

In the year 1772, Daniel Defoe wrote *A Journal of the Plague Year* in which he described a plague in the South of France. Daniel narrates how a community tried to respond after the arrival of the pandemic.¹⁰ Desperate individuals perform desperate things: the wealthy are able to flee, some live in obdurate denial till the plague catches up with them in their houses and streets, commoners hunker down and hoard whatever comes their way while the quacks, conmen and charlatans become opportunists and begin exploiting the panicked population. To make matters more worse, the parents resolve to kill their own, eliminate those alleged to introduce the virus in the community and commit suicide. Everybody is thus merely reactive. However, they are reactive in their own way. Eventually, in order to curtail the spread of the virus, the governing council enforced martial law, had warning marks on windows and doors of residents and positioned armed guards in every street to prevent movement of people. This ideally depicts the desperate measures the governments of the day are trying to impose to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) is one more novel that painted an apocalyptic image of a potential world entangled by pandemics. The novel that narrates how few individuals are immune to diseases exposes advances in medicine that led to the idea of immunization of people that has contributed to defence particularly against communicable ailments. However, Edgar Allen Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842) unfortunately reveals how government authorities have constantly failed to deal with the emergence of a pandemic/epidemic. The victims of the Red Death suffered a lot as they bled to death via their pores. Despite that, the authorities and the privileged class led by Prince Prospero did nothing but locked themselves in a lonely luxurious well entertaining castle thinking that the outside world will take care of itself. Nonetheless, all was not well. Edgar points out that unwelcomed guest, the Red Death, entered their castle and first claimed the Prince's life before descending to the rest of the revelers.

Laura Spinney's *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World* is another literary work that narrates how the Spanish Flu swept the world in three deadly waves between 1918 and 1919 infecting over five hundred million people and claiming over fifty

million lives. This made the flu, the most deadly disease in the history of mankind. Laura points out the flu just like the current COVID-19 was 'democratic on one level' as it could easily infect all and sundry.¹¹ There is clear similarity and disparity in both diseases. For instance, most people were and are still vulnerable with least access to healthcare; they live in crowded shanties and as such at a greater risk; the ones who gets infected by the disease were and are still being quarantined or isolated. Presently however, the medical care system is at an advanced stage leading to few confirmed deaths related to the pandemic.

The year 1978 saw the publication of *The Stand* by Stephen King. Stephen narrates how a strain of influenza intentionally manufactured by the American army as a biological weapon sneaked out of an underground secrete laboratory only to colonize the world community within a short period leading to the death of 99.4% of its population.¹² Stephen described the carriers of the virus as individuals who were totally unaware that they were infected but only came to realize when it was too late for themselves and others. Stephen was worried of two things: why the so called advanced civilization easily collapsed after calamity outdistanced science's capacity to deal with an emergency; and how global civilization contributed to the spread of the virus.

Yuval Harari in his book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* written in 2017 describes plagues as things of the past. He claims that both the incidences as well as the impact of the pandemics have drastically reduced in the past few decades as a result of exceptional achievements in the world of medicine in the 21st century (Jenkinson, 2020).¹³ According to Yuval, it is for this reason the initial panic in the outbreak of SARS (2002-2003) and Ebola (2014) that the spread was swiftly contained.¹⁴ The scientific medical magic also helped to contain HIV AIDS that emerged in 1980s even though it has so far claimed over thirty million innocent lives worldwide. If Yuval is indeed right, COVID-19 can be easily be defeated by the world of science.

3. BLENDING COVID-19 WITH ABSURDISM IN ALBERT CAMUS' 'THE PLAGUE':

Albert Camus' *The Plague* is typically a blend of art and philosophy. The novel depicts a city under a siege from incurable disease. Albert's philosophy in *The Plague* is generally referred to as 'absurdism.' This ideally means a universal call to recognize absurdity of existence in

humanism. Albert at the outset describes absurdism as being “born out of confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus, 2004, p.515).¹⁶ The illogicality of living in a world devoid of essential things like the internet attracted the collision against the desire to lead a meaningful life thus resulting to the struggle referred to as absurd. He therefore resolves to use his writing *i.e., The Plague* in a quest for recognition in an otherwise an absurd world.

Conventional religion as Albert tries to portray while narrating the priest’s sermon is indeed incompatible with absurdism (Camus, 1947).¹⁷ He argues that it is not because of our sinful life that god sent the plague to castigate humanity as pointed out in the priest’s sermon but, rather the randomness of the plague that emerges out of nowhere, devastates the residents by mercilessly killing adults and children alike. This therefore implies that the plague has no respect for religion as the innocent and the guilty are similarly charged with death - they all die.

The Plague portrays an atheist world where it is futile to blame the angry gods or to question deities for disregarding petitions, praises and appeals of their ardent believers in times of the epidemic (Clay, 2020).¹⁸ Albert observes that the people are unable to entertain the thought of some supernatural deity that sits pretty fine high in the sky while comfortably staring at the innocent masses writhing in unbearable pain, the result of the plague. The deity seems unmoved; it is relaxed and just awaiting the time of judgment despite desperate calls to rescue man cannot withstand. COVID-19 is perhaps a perfect case example: a novel invisible virus with the ability to colonize human bodies, causing sickness that may lead to either temporal/permanent disability or death. With this, the plague is eventually able to heartlessly shut down conventional life of thousands of innocent individuals.

With the emergence of COVID-19 that has essentially changed man’s conventional way of life, humanity is reminded, just like in Albert’s *The Plague* that man exists at the pleasure of the demonic universe. This veracity is too excruciating for humanity. Absurdism in this case has thus helped humanity to appreciate that the universe is indeed indifferent and omnipotent after COVID-19. Albert is then concerned in what it means to be moral while living in such an infested world. This makes him to present a model of heroism that is dissimilar to what humanity is used to.

Dr. Bernard Rieux, a professional doctor at the heart of the story, and considered a hero in the plague cannot fit to be a powerful and free model hero amid COVID-19.²³ He is modest, decent and humble unlike an absurdist hero who is capable of fighting against death. He continually engages himself in an unusual struggle to declare that he is a protagonist of his own tale. He holds that the best a person can do amid the pandemic is to be decent and serve others to one's best (Camus, 1947).²⁴ There is indeed nothing more than that. This was in response to the commendation by his close friend that he was doing heroic work in Oran.

After Dr. Rieux and his close friends Grand, Tarrou and Rambert successfully set up teams of voluntary health workers to administer serums as well as diagnose, hospitalize and manage the sick, he later publicly believed that the plague was totally gone but privately he struggled to curtail the spread of the epidemic. Albert's absurdist view in this context is that all as it crystallizes the height to absurdist denial that upholds that man is entitled to rule whether existence is warranted or not, and that the basic conditions of existence are inferior to human value system. Thus, to be able to foresee what the world throws, for Albert, it is to recognize that life is something beyond any value system, just as the entire universe is. Accordingly, for Albert, the choice to fight for existence is the only meaningful ethical decision that man can take currently amid COVID-19. This refers to declining ideologies which declare when human life is or is not warranted in the universe.

According to Albert, there exists a moral plague in every person. Such a plague is our moral indifference to the needless anguish caused to others, including unintentional pain indirectly endorsed but which happens under our implied consent to the current social contract. Thus, the vicious infectious attack by COVID-19 among the poor and marginalized communities is for Albert, another manifestation of the plague in the contemporary period.

4. ALLEGORIC AND IMAGERY IN ALBERT CAMUS' 'THE PLAGUE' IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19:

Human existence in a pandemic infested environment is perhaps a recurring theme in the literary world in which Albert Camus' *The Plague* is part and parcel. The novel is a basic point of reference for any writer in the contemporary world. *The Plague* is indeed a modern masterpiece of imagery, allegory and symbolism that narrates how the city of Oran is

attacked by the plague and the community's struggles in trying to resist the evil (Estela, 2002).²⁷ The Oran society was a society full of happiness just like many of us at the moment. They were engaged in merry making unaware of the impending epidemic. Suddenly, the plague emerged out of the dead woods neglected mental asylum. 'The Plague' also depicts beds lined up in rows full of dying young men, individuals who are unable to fight back the evil. Dr. Bernard Rieux describes the unrelenting dying moments of the hopeless victims as follows:

I've never in my life seen someone fighting the already defeated battle with plague, their groins sagging with buboes, eyes flushed and fever bright, writhing with every breath that escapes from their body, their limped throats causing squeaks like rat, with an endless thirst that quenches never, until bellies are burst when swelled too much with liquid, lungs defy to cooperate and the already defeated battle comes to an end leaving a body cold and open in every pore, this is not the end we want for us [and] also for our loved ones

As the imagery of the dead rats emerging from the un-ending sewers to awkwardly die in droves in various streets and laneways saturate the storyline, the Oranians seems not to be bothered at all until much later when they begin noticing children, women and men start being attacked by uncontrolled high fever, cough, difficulties in breathing and fatal buboes. Emergency measures were activated: the Oranian city gates and commercial harbor to sea traffic were shut as the authorities declared enforcement of martial law. Sooner than later, there was a food and petrol crisis. Some Oranians took advantage of the crisis turning out to be plague-profiteers preying on the desperation of their innocent fellows. By the time their senses came back, it was already too late as none was permitted to leave or enter the city. The hospitals, learning institutions as well as government buildings converted into temporary hospitals were overwhelmed. As numbers of the infected souls exponentially rose, some eventually gave up as others continued losing their loved ones.³¹ It is at that inopportune moment that Albert points out, "in this respect they were wrong, and their views obviously called for revision."

That apart, as the tentacles of the pandemic stretched, the Government intensified its violent actions against individuals perceived not to follow its rules but it slowly stepped back when it realized that it could not curtail the spread of the disease. Besides, the plague depicted a

government under initial denial of the outbreak of the epidemic. Because of its poor unprepared leadership, it attempted to cover up the epidemic in order to avert an economy and tourism crisis. It is at this moment that Rieux claims that one must be “stone-blind to give in tamely to the plague” (Camus, 1947).³³ The survival of the fittest was deemed to be the only philosophy that reigned. However, the end effect of such an allegoric representation was the fundamental ethical criticism of displacement of emotions and human values.

In parallel with *The Plague*, COVID-19 pandemic has not only exposed a shortage of essential supplies *i.e.*, food stuff, face masks, personal protective equipments, hand sanitizers, *etc.*, but it has also filled hospital beds and claimed many young and old lives. People are under a panic mode. They are running to supermarkets and malls to purchase essentials. As no one can be permitted to quarantine centers, people are waving to their loved ones through windows. Thousands and thousands are living in a world of radical uncertainty. No one knows what the future holds for them and their loved ones but they are certain that one day all will perish.

The Jacques and the general Christ imagery is another point to ponder. Jacques’ death was a result of the cold indifference of pestilence and the fact that all humanity suffers death the same way regardless of whether one is a child, adult, innocent or criminal. After the death, Jacques was seen laying flat “in a grotesque parody of crucifixion.” However, he died for nothing at all as compared to Christ who died for the sins of humanity. The religious imagery Albert adopts in such a case drives home the notion of senseless and irrational suffering.

Even though ‘The Plague’ is considered an allegory for fascism, there are some circumstances that indicate that the novel is an anti-allegory for two key reasons. *First*, the fascist allegory idea loses sight of Albert’s key daring choice (the writing of a book about the Nazis). Albert’s renowned contemporaries, Sartre, Barthes and De Beauvoir suggested to him to substitute the bacillus for Hitlerism but Albert stood his ground on his important mission. *Second*, the novel is clear tactile and bluntly repulsive – there is a story of specific individuals being killed by an actual disease, in ways medieval and pitiless.

5. CONCLUSIONS:

The *Plague*, from the above discussion can be considered as a manifesto of transformed humanism as it reveals the emerging challenges people face after the pandemic. The discourse explores different human behavioral response at a critical moment of the plague. Religion, quarantine, isolation, believe, observance of set standards, initial government intervention, *etc.*, play a key role amid the pandemic.

Post COVID-19 world that stretches beyond the complex trajectories perceived to be dark mountains of the present is worthy to be also noted. Being a novel virus with no hope of the cure soon, the next world of humanity amid the plague can be anticipated to be unusual in various aspects. With the continual co-existence of animals and humans, the death-dealing disease (COVID-19) cannot be literary held to be the last pandemic to sweep humanity out of the current world. The disputable question is whether the future outcome from a comparable epidemic would be worse if circumstances remain constant?

Whether humanity will try and adopt a slew of reforms will determine the future response to future pandemics. Besides, the management of such emerging pandemics will depend on the intervention of the governments, cooperation of commoners with the system. The government should not live in denial nor cover up the incidence of outbreaks.

Under the contours of literature, it may be noted that survivors of the various plagues in the past refocused their lives after the pandemics. They did not wait for the pleasures and promises of the next world. Rather than creating a deepening religiosity, the visitation of the pandemics emboldened among themselves humanism and reason to fight for survival. Besides, man cannot do away with the traditional/medieval methods of virus containment: quarantine, isolation, avoidance of body contact, social distancing and government imposed containment measures will forever be in existence in curbing future pandemics. Such coping mechanism may not result in curing the virus, but will act to slow the pace of transmission thus saving literally billions of innocent lives.

All in all, humanity must remember that no man is an island; we are all in this together. Anyone's death weakens us all. We must strive to find better ways to reconcile, cooperate, unite and commiserate if we are focused to make the best of both bad and good of life.

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- 2 Oran, according to Albert, was a city that was treeless, shallow, moral, soulless, too commercial and one that was without 'reprieve.' This made the city unprepared for the unforgiving catastrophe and to human needs as well as desires as a pestilence.
- 3 Stephen Metcalf (2020) *Its Relevance Lashes You Across the Face*, The Los Angeles Times.
- 4 Kellman Steven G. (1993) *The Plague: Fiction and Resistance*. New York: Twayne.
- 5 According to Monjorika Boss, the word, 'plague', is said to have its origins in the Latin word, *plaga*, meaning stroke or wound, associated with the Greek *plaga* meaning strike or blow, see, Monjorika Boss, *Epidemics and Their Storytellers*, The Telegraph, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/coronavirus-world-literature-epidemics-and-their-writers/cid/1768510>, [accessed on 24th August 2020].
- 6 Some of the well-known biblical plagues, *i.e.*, the Passover story that happened during the Egyptian exodus led by Moses saw ten kinds of plagues unleashed by God to the Egyptian ruler and his people in order to liberate the Israelites.
- 7 See, Monjorika Boss, *Epidemics and Their Storytellers*, The Telegraph, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/coronavirus-world-literature-epidemics-and-their-writers/cid/1768510>, [accessed on 24th August 2020].
- 8 The ten individuals agreed to tell one story a day for 10 days. This resulted to producing one hundred stories while in quarantine.
- 9 *Pandemic Literature: A Meta-List of the Books You Should Read in Coronavirus Quarantine*, Open Culture.
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- 14 According to Yuval, SARS claimed less than one thousand people while Ebola claimed at least eleven thousand victims.
- 15 Apart from the pandemics listed above, there were two other pandemics in the 20th Century: the 1957 Asian flu and the 1968 Hong Kong flu that claimed lives of about 2 million and 4 million people, respectively.
- 16 Camus, A. (2004b). *The Plague*. In *The Plague, The Fall, Exile and the Kingdom, and Selected Essays*. (S. Gilbert, Trans.). New York: Everyman's Library, Alfred A. Knopf. (Original work published 1947).
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- 18 According to Albert, an epidemic is "a shrewd, unflinching adversary; a skilled organizer, doing its work thoroughly and well," see, Jenkinson Clay (2020) *Why We Should be Reading Albert Camus During the Pandemic*.
- 19 Supra note 13.
- 20 Supra note 17.
- 21 Molly Caldwell Crosby, *The American Plague: The Untold Story of Yellow Fever, The Epidemic That Shaped Our History* 1999.
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- 23 It is significant to note that the unheroic heroes in Albert's *The Plague* are individuals now referred to as healthcare providers amid COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the great risk posed by the pandemic, such workers are able to manage the victims of the disease simply because "plague is here and we've got to make a [correct] stand."
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- 28 Paul Barry (2004) *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Greatest Plague in History*.

ENDNOTES:

29 Roger Lowenstein (2020) *Time of Despair*, The Washington Post.

30 Supra note 17 at 58.

31 In most cases, individuals live for the present. No one is bothered of what the future beholds just like in a war or in a distressing position, if a person is caught in their grip, the only grace of stoicism takes charge.

32 Supra note 17.

33 Supra note 17 at 115.

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