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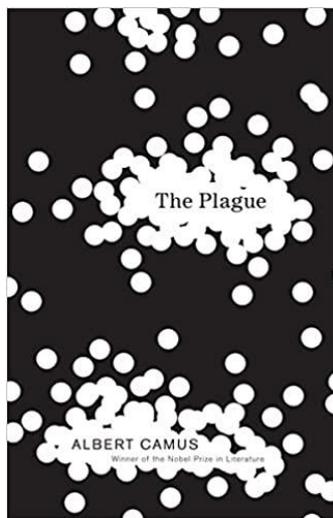
Book Review

It's Life, That's All: Albert Camus' The Plague

Maumil Mehraj*

Department of English, Maitreyi College, University of Delhi, Chanakyapuri,
 New Delhi-110021, India

*Correspondence: sheikhmaumil@gmail.com



Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. 1948. New York: Vintage Books, 1991

*Books are written on Florence and Athens. These cities have what it takes to entice or exalt. They appease a certain hunger of the soul whose nourishment is memory. But no one would have an idea to write on a city where nothing tempts the mind, where ugliness has taken on a measureless part, where the past is reduced to nothingness. And yet sometimes this is very tempting . . . Oran is one of these cities. (Opening, *The Plague*)*

It makes sense to reach for literature that, although based in a different time, mirrors our present situation. And in the context of the world being engulfed in the pandemic, no book seems more evocative than Camus' classic novel. Based in the city of Oran, *La Peste* or *The Plague* can be accurately described as a moment in history. Written

about the time of the bubonic plague, *The Plague* humanises an epidemic, and is as much an honest portrayal of what goes on in the minds of those caught in a diseased land as can be. Camus wrote this work during the war and published it in 1947, the first major French novel after the war. His introduction to the book, while speaking of middle-eastern countries affected by the plague, leads us into an allegorical tale about the relationship between man and his environment. “Oran (is) personified in *The Plague* (and) becomes a collective protagonist in its own right.” (Finel-Honigman) The writing is similarly personal as it is distant, it could be attributed to the fact that the text has an intense understanding of human psychology and so the writing remains thoroughly correct. Rieux, the narrator, does not provide political, socio-economic, or statistical information. The leaders and administrators remain anonymous both in name and function, referred to only as “the authorities,” “the municipality,” or “the administrators.”

The writer’s classical sources include Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War* and Lucretius’ account of the plague in Athens in *De Rerum Natura*. Camus also consulted Boccaccio’s *The Plague in Florence* (1348) and Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year in London* (1722).

The Plague is written in five parts. Strikingly similar to the trajectory of COVID-19’s outbreak, these steps reveal an unsettling similarity between then and now. The first step is the much-delayed realisation of the plague, where the administration finally calls the situation by its real name – The Plague, and ends with the administrative order of quarantine or a lockdown - “Proclaim a state of Plague. Close the town.” (59) There is a sudden disruption in the city’s activities, a work stoppage: “the gaunt idle cranes on the wharves, tip-carts lying on their side, neglected heaps of sacks and barrels” characterise the cityscape. This image is closely reminiscent of Virgil’s description of Carthage, neglected by Dido, in Book IV of *The Aeneid*. The inhabitants’ organic decomposition is simultaneously reflected in the city’s death by petrification and silence: “From eleven onward, plunged in complete darkness, Oran seemed a huge necropolis, the silent city was no more than an assemblage of huge inert cubes” (155). Oran becomes a primordial stone structure, a ghost city under lockdown.

Part two traverses how this city, whose freedoms had been long taken for granted, is converted into a prison of sorts. Only when this freedom is curtailed do the citizens ruminate about the availability of real choices. The third part sees mass-death in the city which is personified to highlight the suffering of the city-dwellers, whilst the penultimate part describes the gradual departure of the plague.

The fifth and last part becomes a mirror-opposite of the first, the closing is replaced by the opening and the moroseness by a certain impression of victory. But what strikes immediately is – a victory against whom? What was the city protected against, or rather, what weapon did the city house that had to be contained and not let out into the rest of the world? In her essay entitled “On Being Ill”, Virginia Woolf talks about how disease has taken as many lives as wars, if not more, and yet the space that disease occupies in literature, as in everyday discourses, is far less than other historic events caused by man. This self-same aggrandisement of the human, and the lessening of nature, has remained constant throughout times, and even now we see systems and individuals alike trying to negate or control the higher phenomena.

Camus, owing to the sheer brilliance of his writing, is seen *documenting* and not necessarily *forming* creative language. The war terminology that is seen in the text is a repetition, and not creation, and is a testimony of how a plague, a flu, a virus is made into an enemy and a “war” is unleashed upon it. He prefaces the novel by a quotation from Daniel Defoe: “It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not.” The subtext is that either the text can be read as a description of the plague’s impact on the city, or as a metaphor for a city under siege.

Amidst the progressive collapse, and a giving-in to death, there exist parties which resist, namely, Rieux and Tarrou, relentlessly employed in hospitals and quarantine camps, trying to save one more life. There is bravado associated with them because the “enemy” here is much stronger. On the other end, there are passive collaborators, namely Cottard, who thrive during the plague. “I’m feeling very fit, never was fitter in my life” (97). This systemic makeup is highly reminiscent of a state which is in the process of, and indeed has been colonised and is equally ready to meet the colonising force.

The retreat of the plague is hailed as the city's liberation, and is met with much festivity. And yet, at the very end, the narrator's account of *The Plague* is a denial of the values that the city stands for. Even liberated Oran remains "stifled, strangled" in contrast to the free natural world around it. As protagonist, myth, or allegory, the city is linked to the plague. It can never be entirely free of this association.

The Plague provides for a rigorously cerebral experience of "Pandemic Literature", although the term is not a standardised one related to the texts written about disease. Camus' allegory of the plague continues to resonate worldwide today, and reaffirms the importance of literature in both articulating and reclaiming the state of humanity.

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