

Exiles and Prisoners: Literary Representation of Illness in Albert Camus's *The Plague*

Namrata Nistandra

Associate Professor, Dept of English, Doaba College, Jalandhar, Punjab

Abstract: Despite Susan Sontag's assertion in her work *Illness as Metaphor* that a disease should primarily be looked upon as a disease and nothing else, literary imagination has often employed illness as a metaphor or objective correlative for diverse ends. In some texts, disease represents an individual's complicity in the rotten system. In others, it is considered as evidence of divine retribution. This paper examines how Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* (1947) employs plague to develop the existential tropes of authenticity, choice, will, exile and absurdity. The idea of pestilence as divine punishment and a scourge also necessitates the task of self-interrogation. Set in the imaginary town of Oran, the author underscores the banality of everyday existence. The death and decay wrought by the plague and its putrescence become symptomatic of the ugliness of the town and its inmates. The novel is also a psychological portrait of the people of this non-descript French town caught unawares by a pestilence. Oscillating between hope and despair, the inmates devise various strategies to cope with the unprecedented nature of suffering—the *Plague* resorts to realism in depicting the different stages of the epidemic's cycle. The novel has also been understood as an allegory where plague stands for the evil perpetrated by the Nazis. This reading further strengthens Camus's play *State of Siege*, a take on totalitarianism. The paper will focus on these aspects of representation.

Keywords: Authenticity, Choice, Will, Absurd, Exile

Despite Susan Sontag's assertion in her work *Illness as Metaphor* that a disease should primarily be looked upon as a disease and nothing else, literary imagination has often employed illness as a metaphor or objective correlative for diverse ends. In some texts, disease represents an individual's complicity in the rotten system. Texts like J M Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and U R Ananthamurthy's

Samskara fall into this category. In others, especially in the Greek texts, the illness (usually plague) is considered evidence of divine retribution. Sontag warns the readers of the dangers of romanticising diseases like tuberculosis and cancer. This creates a feeling of inadequacy among the patients as the disease is linked to psychological traits. This approach puts the responsibility of falling ill and getting well on the patient. Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* (1947) differs from these approaches as it primarily aims to debunk the myth-making associated with illness.

This paper examines how Camus's novel *The Plague* employs plague to develop the existential tropes of authenticity, choice, will, exile and absurdity. Camus was essentially a humanist. He did not believe in God but in life's moral and spiritual dimensions. He firmly believed that evil means could never result in good ends. "In Camus's thought, meaning comes from human acts" (Heims 5). The Absurd is Camus's idea of making sense of the chaos and apparent meaninglessness of the universe. For Camus, the Absurd is a concept encompassing the philosophical, the social and the psychological dimensions. Camus's vision is not governed by nihilism but by strongly and deeply felt moral convictions. Camus's ideal is a Sisyphean character, relentlessly pursuing his chosen path. "The burden of Sisyphus, Camus had concluded, which requires devotion to the activity of the moment rather than to unachievable (putative) perfection is not a curse" (Heims 37). Camus provides "...a naked demonstration of a man struggling doggedly to determine his literal and figurative place in the world" (Mckee 56). Camus's hero is a person who embraces the absurdity of existence but dares to live life in totality.

Existentialists believe in the power of choice. The power to choose brings responsibility. Even if existence is inherently absurd, it would be wrong to cling to despair. To believe that we are fixed entities is termed 'bad faith'. Existentialists despise victimhood. It is for the individual to face every challenge with courage and dignity. In other words, to live an authentic life. Gary Cox describes authenticity as "the holy grail of existentialism" (5). Camus rejects the conventional reasons for giving meaning and purpose to one's life. He rejects God and the consequent notions of subjugating

one's will to divine will and, consequently, the possibility of a transcendent reality. The existence is absurd because it is irrational, unjust, and meaningless. However, what matters for Camus is the role human beings take on themselves alone or in association with others to meet life's challenges. The focus is on the individual. Jean-Paul Sartre also postulated that "Man is condemned to be free" (23). As there is no God, human beings have a moral responsibility to create their essence. Authenticity is the total involvement of people in choosing their path and fulfilling themselves. This makes existentialism a philosophy of vibrant optimism. It is "an ethics of action and involvement" (Sartre 36). Camus's novel is an expression of the ideas developed in his non-fiction.

The novel is also a psychological portrait of the people of a non-descript French town caught unawares by a pestilence. Oscillating between hope and despair, the inmates devise various strategies to cope with the unprecedented nature of suffering. The death and decay wrought by the plague and its putrescence become symptomatic of the ugliness of the town and its inmates. Camus makes his protagonist, Dr Rieux, remember that nearly thirty plagues have ravaged humankind and decimated its population. He vividly imagines the cities of Athens, Chinese towns, Marseille, Provence, Constantinople, Milan, London, etc., "nights and days filled always, everywhere, with the eternal cry of human pain" (Camus 38). The idea of pestilence as divine punishment and a scourge also necessitates the task of self-interrogation. In the novel, the illness seems to be of the whole town: "It was as if the earth on which our houses stood were being purged of its secreted humour—thrusting up to the surface the abscesses and pus-clots that had been forming in its entrails" (Camus 13). Dr Rieux imagines the plague as "one of the great visitations of the past" (Camus 42). However, the *Plague* resorts to realism in depicting the different stages of the epidemic's cycle for a greater part of the narrative.

Set in the imaginary town of Oran, the novel underscores the banality of everyday existence. The narrator describes the town as ordinary and ugly. He finds its inhabitants living mundane lives devoted to money-making. Stripped of any finer sensibilities, their evening pastimes are also characterised by monotony. "Certainly nothing is commoner nowadays than to see people working

from morn till night and then proceeding to fritter away at card-tables, and in small-talk what time is left for living” (Camus 2). The narrator points out the volatility of people and extremes of climate to underscore the fact that it is difficult for people to face death. The town of Oran is “treeless, glamourless, soulless” (Camus 3).

The epidemic’s beginnings are considered random events by the people of Oran. Dr Bernard Rieux finds dead and dying rats in the town. The townsfolk are also disturbed by the shrill death cries of rats and their rotting and bloated bodies. Dr Rieux is someone who wanted “to have no truck with injustice and compromises with the truth” (Camus 10). He rings up the Municipal Office and urges them to take the sanitary condition of the town seriously. The hall porter M Michel’s death after suffering from fever and wheezy breathing plunges everyone into panic and serious thought. Dr Rieux advises the chairman of the local Medical Association to isolate the fresh cases, but his warning is not heeded. Dr Rieux is the first one to conclude that the various symptoms reported by the inmates of the town, i.e., suppurating glands and fever, point to plague, but nobody believes him. Even his colleagues think that it is a taboo subject. He is the lone voice for implementing stern measures without raising unnecessary alarm. The authorities fail miserably in imposing Draconian measures; instead, their efforts are perfunctory.

Camus wryly points out the deeply held conviction among people that though pestilences happened in the world, they could not be afflicted by one. The instinctive urge to deny and live in negation perhaps explains why people do not take a crisis seriously. The inhabitants of Oran live a life wrapped in themselves. Dr Rieux is also torn between fear and confidence. The dimensions of pestilence are out of proportion for the perception of human beings, and this probably accounts for the fact that people hope that the nightmare will soon be over. However, ironically, people fall prey to the pestilence, especially those who are optimistic and do not take any precautions.

Part II of the book gives an account of the psychological suffering of the town inmates forced into exile as the town gates are shut. The separation from loved ones exacerbates the misery of

confinement. It is for the first time that perhaps everyone finds themselves in the same boat. The inability to write letters and phone calls to their loved ones throws people into unprecedented crisis. The people of Oran suffer two-fold: one for their own lives and second for their loved ones whose fates they did not know. The imagined suffering of the family members leaves them distraught beyond words. The “prisoners of the plague” (Camus 65) find themselves cut off from the main spring of action. They are forced back on their memories to find solace. “the first thing that plague brought to our own town was exile...that sensation of a void within which never left us, that irrational longing to hark back to the past or else to speed up the march of time, and those keen shafts of memory that stung like fire” (Camus 67).

The inmates also take recourse to denial of reality but drop the mask when they realise that the exile would last longer than they had expected. “At such moments, the collapse of their courage, willpower, and endurance was so abrupt that they felt they could never drag themselves out of the pit of despond into which they had fallen” (Camus 68). Due to their suffering, they simply drift through life like shadows. People realise what it means to live like prisoners. In these abnormal situations, they have to depend on themselves without support from anybody else. The plague takes a toll on people’s relationships. Grand and Jeanne’s marriage falls apart because of overwork and poverty. Rambert wishes to leave Oran to go back to his wife.

With time, people’s patience plummets, and they think they are being pushed to madness. The hot weather exacerbates the epidemic, and people get discouraged and disheartened. “Plague had killed all colours, vetoed pleasure” (Camus 109). They pin their hopes on the impending cold weather. The disease acquires a deadly form, and there is an alarming rise in the death rate. As the epidemic picks up momentum, people no longer have individual destinies but only a collective destiny. The strongest emotions that people share are a sense of exile, deprivation, fear and revolt. The town “...seemed a lost island of the damned” (Camus 162). The plague acts as a unifying as well as a disrupting force. This is most apparent when illness forces people to quarantine themselves. As sanity

crumbles, people begin setting fire to their dwelling places to kill the plague germs. The funerals become a hurried affair as vigil near the dead bodies is not allowed. Collective funerals have become necessary due to the scarcity of coffins and winding sheets. The lack of dignity of last rites is what Camus associates with “the plague’s last ravages” (Camus 169).

As the plague continues unabated, people no longer feel a sense of rebellion but a crushing despondency. The town inmates become indifferent, exhausted and unable to visualise any future for themselves. People are engulfed in darkness or slumber and stop trying to keep the disease at bay. There is a spurt in spending on luxuries and the theatre as if people wanted to extract whatever joy they could from life. The epidemic enters its final phase as its strength declines, and people get into cautious jubilation. Dr Rieux realises that all one could glean from the experience of the plague is memories and knowledge. Nevertheless, the plague ends only for those being reunited with their loved ones and not for the lonely mourners.

Dr Rieux is the epitome of how human beings can live a meaningful existence in the face of calamity. He finds sustenance in meeting the challenges of daily life. “All the rest hung on mere threads and trivial contingencies; you could not waste your time on it. The thing was to do your job as it should be done” (Camus 39). The doctor realises that, like all misfortunes, plague helps people to look beyond themselves, but “All the same, when you see the misery it brings, you’d need to be a madman; or a coward, or stone blind, to give in tamely to the plague” (Camus 131). Dr Rieux believes that the appropriate response to a man on a deathbed would be to help ease their suffering and not think of the ennobling nature of the experience. He tells Tarrou that he has never been able to reconcile to the idea of people dying of disease. The doctor believes that even if the battle against the plague is one of never-ending defeat, one must put up a fight and not surrender before the epidemic. He tells Rambert that one must have “common decency”. “I don’t know what it means for other people. But in my case, I know that it consists in doing my job” (Camus 158). Camus’s message is,

“...on this earth there are pestilences, and there are victims, and it is up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences” (Camus 243).

Camus ironises the profoundly entrenched idea in the collective unconscious of people that plague is a scourge sent by God to humble the proud and show mankind their place. “For plague is the flail of God and the world His threshing-floor, and implacably He will thresh out His harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff” (91). Father Peneloux and ecclesiastical authorities organise a Week of Prayer where the epidemic is understood as a time of darkness devoid of God’s light. Religion is a succour in the initial phases, but after some time, people take recourse to pleasure. Dr Rieux thinks that putting faith in God would absolve him of the need to cure people. The sight of the Magistrate’s son, wasted to the bone and contorted with pain, interrogates the idea of plague as divine punishment for the sins of humankind. The death cries of the child fill the doctor with revolt. “And until my dying day, I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture” (Camus 208). Even Father Peneloux feels something change in him as the child succumbs to death. Stripped of certainties, he thinks we can only surrender before the divine will. Father Peneloux, too, contracts the disease that proves fatal in his case. Faith does not ameliorate suffering.

Camus’s novel is rich in symbols, too. In this novel, water symbolises renewal and regeneration, whereas the sun is a symbol of oppression, a hostile force. The sun keeps shining brightly as an agent of indifferent forces of nature. The intense heat of a Mediterranean day brings thoughts of violence and restlessness. As the city of Oran reels under the plague epidemic, mentioning the sea recedes from the narrative. The inhabitants’ link with the sea is ruptured as the beaches, bathing pools and ports are closed. The sea fades in people’s memory and imagination as they learn to live like prisoners, focused only on survival. In one of the episodes, a plunge into the sea serves to invigorate Dr Rieux and Tarrou, and they feel as if the city and the plague do not exist for the time being. The swim creates a new bond of warmth and friendship between the two men.

Apart from being a man of letters, Camus was active throughout his career as a journalist. He was not an armchair philosopher. His most significant achievement in this regard is his editorship of the clandestine French Resistance newspaper *Combat*, published during the Second World War. *The Plague* has also been understood as an allegory where it stands for the evil perpetrated by the Nazis. Neil Heims reads the novel as a response to the absurdity of “living meaningfully” (40) in the face of “an invincible evil” (40). This reading derives further strength from Camus’s play *State of Siege*, a take on totalitarianism. For this play, Camus had collaborated with Jean-Louis Barrault. Set in Spain, the play describes a character named Plague who ravages the town, killing people randomly.

There are some solid autobiographical echoes in *The Plague*. Camus started working on the novel in 1941. The novel underscores Camus’s preoccupation with illness and death. He depicts the suffering of the body with its bloody infections and gradual disintegration. At the same time, he also describes psychological suffering and pain as people inch towards a miraculous recovery or inevitable end. The urgency of disease is also brought home to the novelist as he had been coping with bouts of tuberculosis in those years. Secondly, the world of the novel is a world where women are conspicuous by their absence. The only women who appear are peripheral. In his *Notebook*, Camus writes: “It is a world without women and thus without air” (18). Jenn Mckee links Camus’s failure to create women characters of depth to the alienation and disconnect faced by the author in his relationship with his deaf and nearly mute mother. Mckee thinks it shapes “...Camus’s repeated failure to include female characters of any complexity or significance in his prose” (58).

Camus’s message in the novel is delivered in the character and choices of Dr Rieux. As the novel ends, the doctor drops the mask and reveals that he is the narrator who wants to witness the ravages of the plague. He wanted to be a chronicler of those troubled times and record the injustice done to people. The time of pestilence has taught him “that there are more things to admire in men than to despise” (Camus 297). This chronicle is also an account of a never-ending fight against terror “...by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost

to be healers” (Camus 297). The task has Sisyphean dimensions, as the doctor knows very well that the plague bacillus remains dormant and can rise again at any time.

The novel’s popularity has been resurgent because of the recent pandemic outbreak. *The Plague* has been read and understood as a narrative about the contemporary world. The onset, spread, and decline of the plague epidemic in the novel bear an uncanny resemblance to the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. People oscillated between hope and despair, pinned their hopes on the weather, and lost loved ones. There was no dearth of people exploiting the pandemic for mercenary ends and selfless warriors who worked till the end of their tether. The only difference between fiction and the natural world was that internet connectivity had not transformed human communication when Camus wrote his novel. The psychological and bodily pain, suffering and anxiety made it an archetypal situation. The religious and philosophical issues raised by Camus resonated with people as they lived through quarantine and brooded on what the future held—no wonder this book gained wide readership during the COVID-19 crisis.

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