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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Moral Values as a Panacea in the Time of Pandemics: An Analysis of A. Camus's *The Plague***

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**ABSTRACT**

At the critical moments of pandemic and human suffering, the integration of moral values plays a vital role in reducing even eliminating the negative consequences of mass suffering and destruction caused by pandemics. This paper aims to explore through analysis and interpretation of *The Plague* (1947) by Albert Camus how the people of Oran have succeeded in confronting the violent impact of the plague, which afflicts their town through adherence to a set of moral values of love, caring, honesty, compassion, sacrifice, and solidarity. The significance of the study lies in its attempt to raise people's awareness of the importance of moral values in eradicating human suffering during the time of crisis since it resonates with the chaos and disturbance of the current predicament of Covid 19 so that to create a sense of hope and solace in a time that so many people are mentally depressed and physically fall apart.

**KEYWORDS**

Moral Values, Pandemics, *The Plague*, Albert Camus

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**1. Introduction**

Natural crises like plagues, earthquakes, floods ... etc., may befall any community and destroy all aspects of life. Governments usually take some precautionary policies and measures to avoid human suffering and death. These plans would not be effective unless they are sustained by individuals who are aware enough of their moral responsibility towards society. The individual moral obligation to his community is created by adherence to a set of moral values approved by his culture. Reading *The Plague* (1947), it seems as if Camus (1913-1960) was foretelling the future and predicting the current coronavirus pandemic. The novel draws attention to an effective practical road map for confronting pandemics all over the world. Through analysis and interpretation of *The Plague*, the study demonstrates the severe psychological and social impact of the plague on individuals. The research argues that the people of Oran have succeeded in confronting the violent impact of the plague, which afflicted their town through adherence to a set of moral values of love, caring, honesty, compassion, sacrifice, and solidarity. The study contributes to raising people's awareness of the importance of moral values in eradicating human suffering during a time of crisis.

**2. Background**

*The Plague* has inspired many literary talents who manipulate the element of the pandemic as a motif to analyze human suffering and history in their fictional writings such as Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), Stewart O'Nan's *A Prayer for the Dying* (1999) and José Saramago's *Blindness* (1995). Camus's *The Plague* has also stimulated many critical readings that deal with the text's historical dimension and interpret the plague as an allegory of the Nazi occupation of France. Foley (2008), for example, claims that the plague can be read as an allegory of the German war against France since the French title of the novel "*La Peste*" can be attached to the French phrase denoting the Nazis, which is *la peste brune* (50). A. Hubbell (2015) argues that *The Plague* is a nostalgic representation of the area where Camus was born in. She believes that the French writer attempts to fictionally delineate the devastating effect of cholera on the Algerian population of Oran in 1849 when the disease killed more than 1,100 people. The moral aspect of the text has been discussed in relation to the narrative style of the novel, which is the subject of David Stromberg's "Moral Reserve: Narrative Ethics and Aesthetic Principles in Camus's "La Peste" (2014). Stromberg examines the importance of the objectivity of the narrator in his narration. However, the narrator of *The Plague* betrays his principles of objectivity

by revealing his identity at the end of the novel. According to Stromberg, this "act of betrayal" is evidence of Camus's powerful narrative style. In his article "The unwilling guide: Camus's *The Plague*" (2020), Zaretsky, R. applauds the courageous struggle of the ordinary people of Oran against the plague and relates it to the resistance of contemporary people to Covid-19. He also criticizes "the insouciance, indifference, or inhumanity of those who hold extraordinary power" and political leaders in dealing with the pandemic (39). Highlighting the heroic role of doctors at the time of pandemics, Paredes (2020) in "Albert Camus's *The Plague* Revisited for COVID-19" concludes ", there are many modern versions of Dr Rieux who have cared with the utmost professionalism and *decency* for those severely afflicted by this modern plague." (898).

All the studies mentioned above treat different issues in Camus's *The Plague*, yet the healing significance of moral values at the time of pandemics is not given ample consideration by previous studies. Thus, this study endeavours to analyze the suffering of people due to the plague and how they successfully overcome the negative consequences of the plague through adherence to a set of moral values that help in surviving and coping with the epidemic.

### 3. Albert Camus as a Moralist

Albert Camus is an Algerian French writer and journalist. Despite his miserable childhood, he joined the school and was greatly affected by his teacher: Louis Germain, who inspired his thought and personality and to whom he dedicated his Nobel Prize for literature in 1957. Receiving his education in French public schools, Camus was imbued with the French ethical values and ideals of the Revolution related to justice, freedom, and equality, which permeated his critical essays and novels. His fictional works reflect the social and political conditions of the periods between 1930 and 1960, which attest to his deep concern and steadfast commitment showing the inadequacy of some modern standards brought about by dogmatic systems. Furthermore, this attitude stems from his consciousness of the ethical responsibility of the artist in proving the dignity of man in a meaningless and chaotic modern world. Denying the value of art for its own sake, Camus advocates the functional role of art, as he insists that art should "promote our awareness of the absurd (i.e., make us see that humans strive for meaning but cannot achieve it) and our attitude of revolt (i.e., make us accept the absurd as a fact and reject it as a norm)" (Pözlner, 2020, p.369). In other words, art has revolutionary effective power "to increase the sum of freedom and responsibility to be found in every man and in the world" (Camus, 1961, p. 240).

Answering a question related to the extent of the artist's moral commitment to his society, Camus (1995) claims:

the artist today becomes unreal if he remains in his ivory tower or sterilized if he spends his time galloping around the political arena. Yet between the two lies the arduous way of true art. It seems to me that the writer must be fully aware of the dramas of his time and that he must take sides every time he can or knows how to do so. (p.238)

The artist's responsibility should be directed not only to his art but also to his society: "How would an artist justify his privileges (if he has any) in any other way than to take part, at the level of everyone, in the long struggle for the liberation of work and culture?" (Camus, 1958, p. 60). On another occasion, he emphatically announces: "My job is to write my books and fight when the liberty of my own and of my people is threatened. That's it" (*Carnets III*, 1989, p. 22). As a human rights activist, Camus joined many resistance groups in Algeria in 1940 and 1941. Later, he became the editor of the newspaper *Combat*. Thus, he has succeeded in achieving his goal as Jean-Paul Sartre admits that Camus "represented in this century...the current heir of this long line of moralists whose works constitute perhaps that which is the most original in French literature"(quoted in Ros, 2021, pp.170-71).

As a moralist, Camus's stance manifests in his harsh criticism of totalitarian ideology and political movements launched in Europe in the 1930s (Sharpe, 2017, p. 4). His oeuvre explores his denunciation of the moral collapse of human values resulting from the destruction caused by World War II. At the beginning of the war, he declared:

Often the values on which our life is built have almost collapsed. But never before have these values and those we love been threatened all together and all at the same time. Never before have we been so completely handed over to total destruction. (1996, p. 149)

In his fiction, Camus exhibits a deep concern with the plight of humankind in the absurd modern world of material technology and moral abyss. This has established him as a moralist whose main concern is to infuse moral values and resist the modern world's void. Fulfilling one's duty towards humanity, according to Camus, entails adopting communal moral values and engaging with other members to make life meaningful (Camus, 1973). To rebel against calamity, whether it is a disease or a war, is considered a moral imperative that necessitates communal suffering to eradicate evil. In this respect, Camus explains the significance of collective moral engagement at the time of catastrophe: "suffering is individual, but from the moment a movement of rebellion

begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience...The malady experienced by a single man becomes a mass plague." (Camus, 1954, 22).

#### **4. Moral values in *The Plague*:**

In his novel *The Plague*, Camus presents the power of human resistance sustained by moral values in response to the deterioration and evil caused by the plague. Set in the Algerian city of Oran, the novel under scrutiny describes the outbreak of the bubonic plague. The spectacle of the sweeping of dead rats in the streets of Oran jerking and spurting blood increases people's panic. Before the plague, people of Oran, like in any modern city, are leading a comfortable and carefree life which has been interrupted by the sweeping disease to demonstrate an important historical fact about crisis and plagues 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 heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always, plagues and wars take people equally by surprise. (Camus, 1991, p.31)

Another important aspect of plagues is that they are contagious and prevalent. They are not discriminatory and impartial, as Dr. Rieux observes:

week by week, the prisoners of plague put up what fight they could. Some even contrived to fancy they were still behaving as free men and had the power of choice. But actually, it would have been truer to say that by this time, mid-August, the plague had swallowed up everything and everyone. No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all (Camus, 1991, p. 167).

Thus, this collective suffering and grief require a collective response. The novel analyzes how the characters attempt to fight the disease collectively equipped with human moral values such as love, commitment, solidarity, and honesty. Although emergency measures and medical efforts are launched against the epidemic; hospitals and quarantine camps are founded, and the dead bodies are burned; this study attempts to prove that it is only through strong adherence to human moral values that people can defy the negative effects of the pandemic. Counting on moral values as the panacea to the overwhelming plague stems from the novelist's inherent belief that human beings are inclined more to goodness than to evil:

The evil that is in the world always comes from ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence if they lack understanding. On the whole, men are more [sic] good than bad; that, however, isn't the real point. But they are more or less ignorant, and that is what we call vice or virtue; the most incorrigible vice being that of an ignorance that fancies it knows everything and therefore claims for itself the right to kill. The soul of the murderer is blind; and there can be no true goodness nor true love without the utmost clear-sightedness. (Camus, 1991, p.113)

The plague has affected people physically and psychologically. People find themselves quarantined and isolated from their friends, neighbors, and even other members of their families. In this respect, Camus resolves:

At first, the fact of being cut off from the outside world was accepted with a more or less good grace, much as people would have put up with any other temporary inconvenience that interfered with only a few of their habits. But now they had abruptly become aware that they were undergoing a sort of incarceration under that blue dome of sky, already beginning to sizzle in the fires of summer. (Camus, 1991, p.100)

Love and compassion are the most prerequisite moral values one needs during a time of suffering and solitude. Therefore, feelings of distress, sadness, and anxiety due to the absence of loved ones are "the greatest affliction of the long period of exile" (Camus, 1991, p. 67). In times of grief, it is very comforting to be in the company of relatives and close friends. Unfortunately, this kind of comfort is impossible and scarce in Oran due to the spread of the plague, which requires obligatory social distancing. Suffering caused by the absence of relatives and loved ones is very severe as Dr. Rieux, separated from his wife who is sent to another country for medication, affirms: "In fact, our suffering was twofold; our own to start with, and then the imagined suffering of the absent one, son, mother, wife, or mistress" (Camus, 1991, p.71). During suffering and solitude, the inhabitants of Oran aspire to be attached to their cherished ones.

The sense of exile and isolation is highlighted in *The Plague* right from the opening chapter of the novel in the description of the physical setting of Oran: "as a town "built with its back turned to the bay" making it "impossible to see the sea" despite it being "at the edge of a perfectly formed bay" (Camus, 1991, p.7). The novel describes the feeling of despair and alienation the people suffer from when afflicted by the bubonic disease. Realizing that they are shut off from the rest of the world, the feeling of separation and exile transforms from an individual one to that "of a whole people" as they witness "together with fear, the greatest agony of that long period of exile" (53). To add to their agony, sending letters is prohibited to prevent disease transmission. Means of communication are restricted to emergency calls of birth and death. Unable to face reality, the people submit to "aimless days and sterile memories" and wander like "shadows who could only have found strength by resigning themselves to taking root in the soil of their distress" (Camus, 1991, p.57). The severe emotional suffering of the experience is described by Rieux as "that hollow that we constantly carried inside us, that precise emotion, that unreasonable desire to go backwards or, on the contrary, to speed up the march of time, those burning arrows of memory" (Camus, 1991, p. 56).

Raymond Rambert, a journalist from Paris who is exiled by the plague from his home country and the woman he loved, has exerted a lot of efforts to escape from Oran. Using official and illegal means, he suffers endless delays. However, at the time he succeeds in finding a way to escape, he changes his mind and follows the dictates of humanity and finds himself deeply attached to the community of Oran in its suffering. Although Rambert is a stranger who is not obliged to stay in Oran and to be quarantined yet, he decides to join Dr. Rieux and other people in their struggle to fight the plague: "Would you agree to my working with you until I find some way of getting out of this town?" (Camus, 1991, p.137). In other words, Rambert is caught in a struggle between his desire to join his wife and his responsibility to humanity. He feels ashamed to leave Oran in this critical moment for the sake of satisfying his selfish desires as he evaluates his action as "shameful to be happy by oneself" and that "this business is everyone's business" (Camus, 1991, p.170). He realizes that love will not be complete unless it encompasses all humanity.

Looking at M Othon's young son, Jacques lying dead in his bed, Rambert "took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. But after his first glance at the child's face, he put them back" (Camus, 1991, p.174). This, in a sense, confirms his deep sorrow, sadness, and compassionate feelings with the people of Oran. Rambert is no longer a stranger, but he feels a deep sense of belonging to the suffering people of Oran. This love for humanity can save people from the evil of pandemics. He realizes that: "if there is one thing one can always yearn for and sometimes attain, it is *human love*." (Camus, 1991, p. 300). It is this genuine sort of love and compassionate relationship that Rambert shares with people to defy the danger of the plague.

As a social moralist, Camus encourages individual sacrifice and commitment to one's society claiming that:

There is a certain form of socialist doctrine that we detest, perhaps even more than we detest the politics of tyranny. It is a doctrine that rests on optimism and invokes the love of humanity to exempt itself from serving human beings, the inevitability of progress to evade the question of wages, and universal peace to avoid necessary sacrifice. (Camus, 2007, p.122.).

Elucidating the positive and negative sides of the plague, Zepp (1983) claims that the plague "destroys, but it is also a regenerative force, insofar as it allows the collective experience and a new awareness of life" (p.400). Therefore, it is this feeling of togetherness and belonging that motivates Rambert to join the people of Oran in their fight against the plague, as the narrator explains: "No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and emotions shared by all." (Camus, 1991, p.167). Discussing Rambert's action of solidarity, Bartlett (2004) accentuates:

Having worked side by side with the doctor and others in fighting the plague during his enforced stay in Oran, he has developed a sense of responsibility toward his relationships with the people there. But one also finds in him that aspect of solidarity that is the compassionate choice to suffer with (p.79).

In *The Plague*, Camus asserts the significance of honesty and commitment in times of disasters and pandemics. Dr. Rieux is utterly committed to his work as a physician, which increases his deep attachment to the population of Oran. He exhibits uncompromising work ethics and moral principles in his struggle against evil and human suffering. What makes Rieux a "true doctor", as described in the novel by one of the characters, is his dedication and honesty in performing his duties "I'm concerned with man's health; and for me, his health comes first" (Camus, 1991, p.219).

When the people of Oran claim that that "a pestilence does not have human dimensions, so people tell themselves that it is unreal, that it is a bad dream which will end" (Camus, 1991, p.30) and refuse to accept the reality of the plague, it is only Dr. Rieux who warns the authority against the severe nature of the plague on human beings. He is the first one to utter the word "plague" to describe the disease and discusses the seriousness of the situation with his colleague Dr. Richard:

When a microbe is capable of increasing the size of the spleen four times in three days and of making the mesenteric ganglia the size of an orange and the consistency of porridge, that is precisely when we should rush

to do something....it doesn't matter whether you call it plague or growing pains. All that matters is that you stop it killing half the town (Camus, 1991, p.39).

During the plague, Dr. Rieux exerts a lot of effort and time struggling to help plague victims. He runs an auxiliary hospital and spends long hours at night in the treatment of patients.

His honesty and truthfulness urge him to confront authorities and take stringent sanitation measures to stop the spread of the disease. His integrity and devotion to his work lead Rambert to evaluate his actions as heroic; an evaluation that Rieux strongly rejects, as shown in his conversation with Rambert:

However, it must make you understand that this is not about heroism. It's just about honesty. It's an idea that may make you laugh, but the only way to fight the plague is honesty. "What is honesty?" said Rambert, getting serious all of a sudden. I don't know what it is, in general. But, in my case, I know it's just my job." Ah!" said Rambert furiously, "I don't know what my trade is. You may be wrong choosing love. ( Camus, 1991, p.163)

Consequently, Dr.Rieux's moral integrity and commitment encourage Rambert to give up his selfish desire of leaving Oran at the time of the pandemic and to join the people in their struggle to fight the plague. Dr.Rieux's diligent work and moral integrity set a good example for all doctors and health care workers during the outbreak of pandemics who persistently provide medical aid to plague victims putting their lives at risk to save the lives of others. The sacrifice doctors painstakingly and generously give to society during a hard time of the pandemic must be highly appreciated and acknowledged by all people in the world.

Another moral value stressed in the novel to eliminate the pandemic is solidarity. Due to the spread of the plague, the people of Oran find themselves sharing the same destiny and suffering of physical and psychological exile (Barelet, 2004, p.79). The town gates are closed, and all means of communication are suspended. Daily activities of business and commerce are disrupted. The constant fear of the spread of the disease isolates the people of Oran from other cities. They all share feelings of sadness and grief over their friends and family members who become victims of the disease:

In spite of such unusual sights, our town folk apparently found it hard to grasp what was happening to them. There were feelings all could share, such as fear and separation, but personal interests, too, continued to occupy the foreground of their thoughts. Nobody as yet had really acknowledged to himself what the disease connoted. Most people were chiefly aware of what ruffled the normal tenor of their lives or affected their interests. They were worried and irritated. (Camus, 1991, p.73)

To defeat the agony of suffering and isolation caused by their sole enemy, the bubonic plague, the people of Oran exhibit a genuine mass collaboration. Solidarity is fictionally crystallized in the novel in various aspects. It is reflected in the characters' independent choice to share with others their compassionate feelings to alleviate their suffering. For example, when the chance to escape the diseased town is available to Rambert, he decides to give it up and stay in the town because he has developed a strong feeling of sympathy towards the people of Oran, so that "his solidarity transforms from that of merely finding himself in a common condition of being plague-stricken to that of refusing his chance to save himself and choosing instead to stay and cast his lot with those who are not saved" (Bartlett, 2004, 80). Another aspect of solidarity is manifested in what Tarrou explains by saying, "there are pestilences, and there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences" (Camus, 1991, p.153). It is this sense of communal responsibility that motivates Tarrou and Dr. Rieux to "fight for the victims" (p.256)and support those who are oppressed by the violent power of the plague, as he declares to Dr. Rieux: "the essential thing was to save the largest number of people from dying. The only way to do this was to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude. It was merely logical" (Camus, 1991, p.133). Tarrou and Dr.Rieux demonstrate a human inclination to communal engagement and responsibility, as Dr. Rieux claims: "...there's 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" (Camus, 1991, p. 163). They refuse to see people condemned to death without taking action, so they set a plan for recruiting volunteers helping in fighting the plague: "They began to take a genuine interest in the laborious literary task to which he was applying himself while the plague raged above him. Indeed, they, too, found it a relaxation of the strain" (Camus,1991, p.134). It is this feeling of solidarity and unity that Tarrou and Dr. Rieux share with people which forms the cementing force to help in bridging social distance and eradicating the evil of the plague in the town and to celebrate the victory of human moral values over the pandemic.

## **5. Conclusion:**

In brief, despite the development of medical treatment of diseases and pandemics with the continuous innovations of penicillin, antibiotics, and steroids, a complete elimination of the disastrous effect of pandemics is not achieved unless it is sustained by adherence to ethical values of love, compassion, sacrifice, commitment, and solidarity. The study affirms the substantial influence of moral values in alleviating human suffering and agony. As a profound moralist and committed artist whose main concern is to

inculcate ethical values to eradicate all aspects of evil and calamity in society, Albert Camus has composed *The Plague* to practically manifesting the significance of a set of moral values adopted by his characters which greatly contribute to eliminating the ravage of the bubonic plague. After experiencing the plague crisis with its forced isolation and quarantine, the characters have realized that human moral values are capable enough to heal their bodies and souls from all sorts of evil. The study recommends that in pandemic treatment programs, the health planners and decision-makers should reconsider the involvement of moral principles with medical programs and instructions to help society overcome the misery and suffering of pandemics.

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