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EPIDEMIC, POLICING AND THE EXISTENTIALIST WILL TO LIFE IN CAMUS' *THE PLAGUE* VIS-A-VIS CORONA PANDEMIC

BIGRAI BASUMATARY

PhD. Scholar, Department of English
Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, Assam, India
Email: mailtobigrai@gmail.com



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Abstract

This paper examines the breakout of bubonic plague in Camus' eponymous novel in light of the panoptic surveillance of the masses under the pretext of disease containment in the face of the epidemic in order to understand the realpolitik around Corona pandemic of present time and the lessons we may learn about its politicization. While any situation including pandemic of that magnitude is milked by the power-that-be for its sustenance; an ethical response to the crisis, an existentialist battle against it in Camus' *The Plague* offer both a pragmatic roadmap and inspiration. It is against the prism of critical concepts like Foucault's 'Surveillance', Levinas' 'Ethics' and 'Existentialism', this paper studies Camus' novel to understand the corona crisis of our time.

Keywords: Panoptic surveillance, Corona pandemic, realpolitik, ethics, existentialism.

Introduction

Literature as a discipline has enriched the body of knowledge with its depository of information and wisdom encoded in the narratives. For any kind of human experiences, literature with its vast deposits of verse or prose narratives has offered wisdom to reckon with. From religious devotion, call of duty, romance, bitter tragedy to death and diseases, literature has had its source narratives to guide mankind. The recurrent mention of plague in Bible, Homer's *Iliad*, its illustration in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, similar mention in Thucydides' *History of Peloponnesian War* are the examples of prime classics that tell us about deaths and diseases. Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* also chronicles the return of bubonic plague in

Britain. Jack London's 1912 post-apocalyptic novel *The Scarlet Plague* set in the year 2073 after the emergence of a deadly epidemic rings true to our time of Corona pandemic. Albert Camus' 1947 novel titled *The Plague* chronicles the emergence of a deadly bubonic plague in the coastal town of Oran in Algeria. The present paper proposes to study this particular novel in light of the current Corona crisis to draw parallels regarding the administrative and individual responses to the pandemic.

In order to analyse the select text vis-a-vis current Corona crisis and its response, the present study proposes the prism of three critical concepts namely: a) Panoptic Surveillance (Foucault), b) Ethics (Levinas), and c) Existentialism. For the purpose of

conducting research on this topic a working definition of the terms are provided below:

- a) Panoptic Surveillance: Although Jeremy Bentham is credited for developing the concept of panoptic inspection by suggesting the model of a central tower that would allow one to look into every house or prison cells without being seen by its occupants, it was Foucault who further advanced the concept and theorized the 17th century model of discipline and punishment in his book of the same title. According to him, this panoptic surveillance gave a holistic view and control to the power-that-be and consequently covered the subjects under surveillance into submission (or disciplined) for the fear of punishment for any transgression. This 17th century disciplinary mechanism through surveillance or monitoring is at its most prolific utilization and application in the 21st century.
- b) Ethics: Emmanuel Levinas is one of the most prominent philosophers to argue for 'ethics' in modern times. He considered ethics as the first philosophy. For him the ethics of the Other or during the face-to-face encounter with the Other, the epiphany that comes is not necessarily the quest of truth per se but the quest of love. That encounter or epiphany dawns on one, the nobility and gentleness of the other, imperatively making him/her responsible for the other.
- c) Existentialism: As a theory or philosophy, existentialism believes in the individuality rather than any form of divinity and focuses on the question of freewill and choice.

Thus, the present paper intends to study the select text in light of the working definition of the terms provided.

In Camus' novel *The Plague*, in the town of Oran, a strange phenomenon occurs. Rats have been coming out and dying. M. Michel, the concierge, presumed it to be a prank played on him by the

pranksters. But the number of rats dying kept on increasing. A point came where people could no longer avoid this immediate issue. The narrator tells that when on a particular day "8000 rats had been collected, a wave of something like panic swept the town" (Camus, 1947). This phenomenon coincided with the development of disease in the people of the town. First to catch the disease was M. Michel who dies soon after. And gradually the disease keeps on spreading. Dr. Bernard Rieux, visits patients in his vain attempt to heal them, but unfortunately he can't be of any help. He along with one of his colleagues first diagnose this new epidemic as bubonic plague, but the city authority including the Chairman of the Medical Association of Oran refuses to believe it and applies wait-and-watch method thus delaying in prompt response to health crisis and capacity building for the ensuing emergency. As a result, when the disease spreads fast, Oran and its citizens find themselves underequipped with medicine and manpower including hospital beds. The medicine called from Paris takes time to reach Oran and when it arrives, Dr. Castel tries administering the dose which doesn't benefit the patients. Panicked authorities quarantines entire town, sets up sanitation centres for the patients quite late into the battle with the plague. The citizens of Oran viewed this new situation to be of few days, or weeks but when they realized the disease was not going to go overnight, they all felt trapped and felt themselves as exiles separated from world and their loved ones.

A parallel can be drawn here with the Corona pandemic of our time. When it was reported in 2019 in late December in China, international health organizations, public health departments didn't pay heed to its ramifications. And as soon as it engulfed the entire world, suddenly the world panicked and responded incompetently, without any plan of action. This resonates with what the narrator says in the novel- "There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise" (Camus, 1947). The World Health Organization declared Covid-19 as pandemic only on 11th March, 2020, four months after the first case was reported. The health infrastructure of the world including those of

developed and underdeveloped countries collapsed with millions of lives lost. The incredulity on the part of world bodies concerning Covid-19 initially to take it seriously and chalk out a rapid response to it parallels the world of Oran in Camus' *The Plague*. Seventy-four years after Camus' novel, the world didn't learn the lesson speaks so much about us as a progressive society. With specific reference to India, the sudden unplanned declaration of lockdown as a response to the pandemic, resulting in the tragedy of the migrant labourers walking hundreds of miles with wives and children braving sun and the rain, and hundreds of them dying from exhaustion and accident brings out the failure of the concerned authority. According to a news report, over 8,700 people have lost their lives on railway tracks in 2020 Covid induced lockdown in India, many of whom were migrant labourers who chose to walk home along the tracks as train routes are considered shorter than roads or highway (*The Indian Express*, 2021)

Just like the citizens of Oran who felt themselves to be in exile away from their loved ones, being quarantined, where authorities strictly institutionalized their so called imprisonment and monitored them, the corona pandemic of present time also saw the strengthening of institutions and their grips. By invoking of the National Emergency Act in America, the state suspended many of its obligations and obligated its citizens towards its coercion. While given the situation, a strict government surveillance and policing is justified, but the misuse of this power for the political gain of the respective authorities were also seen. A UK study reported that social media and news channels were used to overhype the pandemic to fear its citizens to obedience which goes against democratic principles. Similarly, the expedient invoking of National Disaster Management Act and effecting Section 144 in India to systematically deal with popular anti-government protests happening at that time suggest that respective government's reaping political benefit at the cost of crisis as such. The extent of quarantining its people in their homes, with extreme mechanism of surveillance during pandemic in countries across the world, takes our society close to Foucault's model of panopticon surveillance where a citizen's

personal rights and liberties are suspended and personal space invaded.

Camus' world of Oran, despite its tragedy of epidemic and its mismanagement, is also populated by the dedicated beings to the cause of humanity. Dr. Bernard Rieux, tirelessly works to save as many people as he can. Leaving aside his personal pain of losing his wife to tuberculosis, Dr. Rieux gives his heart and soul, in dealing with this immediate crisis. While arguing with Raymond Rambert, he says that "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, 1947). After being stuck in Oran during outbreak of epidemic and desperate to leave here to be with his loved one, Rambert tries to get away with the help of smugglers. After going through a lot in the process, when he finally makes the successful deal to leave, he decides against it. He says that "Until now I always felt a stranger in this town, and that I'd no concern with you people. But now that I've seen what I have seen, I know that I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody's business" (Camus, 1947) and gets himself voluntarily assisted in the work of Dr. Rieux. This response of Rambert, the dedication of Rieux and many like them exemplifies Emmanuel Levinas' concept of Ethics, that one is obligated towards the Other by some sort of connection, association or love.

Similar parallel can be drawn with doctors, nurses, medical representatives, law enforcements, journalists etc. who braved the deadly virus in providing healthcare service, right information etc. The selfless dedication of the doctors, nurses, policemen and women who stayed away from their loved ones to save the lives of others, beautifully illustrates the ethical concern of the people for their fellow human-beings. The sharing of medicines, oxygen, and health expertise among the countries across the world beautifully summarizes Levinas' notion of 'ethics'.

In the course of the novel, Dr. Rieux and Father Paneloux has a debate concerning the epidemic. Being a man of religion, Father Paneloux reads the epidemic differently than Dr. Rieux. He believes it as some sort of divine wrath and accepts

it with resignation. Dr. Rieux on the other hand challenges this notion and insists that we do not have to be so helplessly resigned to our so called fate rather we should strive to work and persevere. His battle against plague is one such example where rather than passively submitting to it, he tries to save as many people as he can. Although he is not successful all the time, he keeps on trying with his heart and soul. After witnessing the painful death of Jacques Othon, a young boy, Dr. Rieux argues with Father Paneloux and rejects his idea of divinity and the divine plan. He says "No, Father. I've a very different idea of love. And until my dying day, I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture" (Camus, 1947). The debate between Dr. Rieux and Father Paneloux is an intellectual debate where Dr. Rieux advances his existentialist theoretical perspective and praxis. Rather than resigning oneself in the face of plague epidemic, he exercises free will and choice and keeps on battling against the disease no matter how successful or failure he becomes. His is an existentialist battle, a Sisyphean task of rolling the round stone up a sloppy mountain where the stone rolls down again and again and he repeats his task anew.

Similar parallel can be drawn in the struggle of so many dedicated doctors, nurses, volunteers, researchers, microbiologists, certain politicians and world leaders including commoners, who want to see past the pandemic. Their fight against pandemic, their service and care-giving to the patients with the virus are the existentialist choices speaking louder through their deeds.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that while discussing about the outbreak of an epidemic testing the strength and values of humankind, Albert Camus' novel *The Plague* resonates with the Corona crisis of present time and offers a valuable lesson in perseverance and ethics. While this novel is also studied as an allegory of the Nazis and extermination of the Jews, it offers a political reading of the authoritarian regimes and how they control and cower citizens into obedience. In times of the immediate and immense crisis as Corona pandemic,

the emerging field of studies like 'health-humanities' are offering the multifaceted understanding of the issues of health and the interface of literature and the health stand to benefit mankind.

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About the Author: The author is currently pursuing his doctoral research from Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, Assam. He completed his bachelor's and master's in English Literature from Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam. He has qualified NET with JRF in the Year 2019. His areas of interest are Contemporary South Asian English Literature, English Literature from North East India, Environment & Literature and Postcolonial Literature. He can be contacted at mailtobigrai@gmail.com