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A Socio-Cultural Study of Camus's *The Plague*: Hope in the Times of Hopelessness

Suman Swati

Assistant Professor

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Jagran Lakecity University, Bhopal

Abstract

*Society has always been impacted by the sudden crises that have occurred in history, whether it is flood, epidemic or a pandemic. Camus has portrayed the reactions of a society and its people to an epidemic in his work *The Plague*. This work shows the impact of the epidemic on the lives of the people of Oran, the Algerian city. The epidemic that leads to pain and suffering, separation and exile, helplessness and hopelessness, and which is considered to degenerate, turns out to act as an agent of regeneration, when the people of Oran change for the better due to the epidemic.*

The Plague is a story of the scuffle between an epidemic and a community, the story of strength and victory of the human spirit, the fight by the citizens of Oran, against the disease. The people of the city who had been always indulged in themselves are shaken by the epidemic and only then they realize that they can fight against the problem only if they are united and collaborated.

Keywords: *The Plague*, Albert Camus, epidemic, socio-cultural, struggle, pain, suffering, hope

“But a few, like stoic Dr. Rieux, stand together to fight the terror. A monstrous evil has entered their lives but they will never surrender”. (*The Plague*)

Introduction

As we turn the pages of history, particularly the British and European history, we find mention of epidemics, few of them being very devastating. Any country that has experienced

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the epidemics has undergone pain and suffering. However, in the times of such problems, history has also witnessed the changing face of the society and its people.

One such epidemic, the plague occurred in 1940's as an after effect of war in a small French port city of Algier, Oran.

The people of Oran were indulged in their personal affairs isolated from each other just like the city Oran, which was isolated from the others, 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" (7)

But in the wake of the epidemic, both changed drastically. A society that was once disintegrated, integrates and works together to fight against the epidemic.

This paper will examine the socio-cultural impact in the novel *The Plague* by Albert Camus and will try to portray how the citizens find hope in the times of hopelessness.

The author

Camus is popularly known to be an existential philosopher, however he never admitted of being one. His works do question the identity of an individual in this absurd world.

Camus was a French philosopher, author, journalist, editor, political essayist and an activist. His philosophy of the absurd has left a remarkable image in the human mind and the fate: Sisyphus endlessly pushing the rock up to the mountain only to observe it roll back down, each time he reaches to the top.

He won the Nobel Prize in 1957 for literature. He died at an early age of 46 in a fatal car accident in 1960. Though his literary career was short, he has written many works, some of the best ones were translated into English and other languages. His few remarkable works are *The Stranger*, *The Myth of the Sisyphus*, *The Fall*, *The Rebel* and *The Plague*.

The work chosen for this paper is *The Plague*. The novel was published in 1947. It is an absorbing tale of human unrelieved horror, of survival and resilience, and of the ways in which humankind confronts death; *The Plague* is at once a masterfully crafted novel,

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eloquently understated and epic in scope, and a parable of ageless moral resonance, profoundly relevant to our times. In Oran, which is a coastal town in North Africa, the plague begins as a series of portents, unheeded by the people. It gradually becomes an omnipresent reality, obliterating all traces of the past and driving its victims to almost unearthly extremes of suffering, madness, and compassion (Goodreads).

Sociocultural Concept

The sociocultural approach of Vygotsky states that, “humans are embedded in a sociocultural matrix and human behavior cannot be understood independently of this ever present matrix (2002, p.166). Sociocultural theory studies the development of a child brain with respect to its environment and surrounding. Similarly, the theory may be applied in the novel *The Plague*, when the reader observe the changes taking place in the lives of the people and the society at the wake of the disease. The citizens very much like a child start to change when they come in close encounter with the plague. They act very positively, a society which was once disintegrated, integrates due to the new challenges faced by them and they join hands to fight against the deadly disease. These changes may particularly be felt and observed in the few characters in the novel, Rambert, Cottard, Father Paneloux, judge Othon etc.

Socio-cultural impact

Just like Oran, a small port town in Algiers, is cut off from the rest of the world because of its geographical location, so are its people cut off from each other although they live together in a society. They are all engrossed in making money and becoming rich. They do not even enjoy their personal relationships. Having fun and spending time with family is kept only for Saturday and Sundays and rest of the week is spent in making money.

“Our citizens work hard but solely with the object of getting rich. Their chief interest is in commerce, and their chief aim in life is, as they call it, ‘doing business’. Naturally they don’t eschew such simpler pleasures as love-making, sea bathing, going to the pictures. But, very

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sensibly, they reserve these pastimes for Sunday afternoons and Sundays, and employ the rest of the week in making money as much as possible” (*The Plague*, p.2).

People who boast to be in love do not exactly know the meaning of love. The couples in love just consume each other rapidly in the act of love, as an obligation, without knowing much about it. The act of making love is devoid of any feelings of the moment, rather performed as a duty. The town is without intimation. (ibid, 2).

The novel is set in Oran, a port city located on the Algerian coast and is also the headquarters of the Prefect of a French department. The town is grafted on to a unique landscape, in the center of a bare plateau, ringed with luminous hills and above a perfectly shaped bay. “All we may regret is the town’s being so disposed that it turns its back on the bay, with the result that it is impossible to see the sea, you always have to go to look for it” (ibid, 4). Just as the town turns its back on the bay, so too the residents turn their backs on each other. Although they live in a society, yet the majority of the population lives in isolation to one another. They are least affected about the problems in the neighbours’ lives. Even the authorities lacked concern when the plague hits Oran. They took it to be something very casual that would end soon. They took no measures initially, to warn the people about the situation.

The narrator describes the city to be very ugly, with smug placid air. The place itself seems very negative, with no trees or gardens, no birds. Very similar to the place are the people of the town. Everything that they do is with a very casual approach, whether it is work, love or death. The people are like the robots, busy working all through the week, with no time for family or friends. It portrays a very modern society, a defragmented one. The narrator has tried to portray this by justifying that the surroundings, extreme climatic conditions should be held responsible for such a society. Even the characters are portrayed in the similar way except Dr. Rieux, the protagonist of the novel. They are observed to be very self-engrossed.

The Prefect had the responsibility of the whole town and had been appointed to look after all the affairs of it. However, when Dr. Rieux breaks the news of the epidemic to him and asks

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him to make proper plan and do the necessary arrangements to avoid the rise in the death cases. He is unable to take decisions instead he asks the doctors to first confirm that the disease was plague and then only adequate measures could be taken accordingly. Another character, Dr. Richard, too is very concerned about his position and opinion in front of the Prefect. He and Dr. Rieux are friends but when Rieux proposes to the Prefect to declare the disease as an epidemic, he opposes him just because the disease was yet to be confirmed that it was 'plague'.

The authorities too show an indifferent attitude towards the suffering of the people. They do not even bother to alarm the citizens of the town about the worsening condition of the town due to the disease. In the beginning, they are also reluctant to isolate the city unless they get enough evidence of the disease to be plague.

Another character, Father Paneloux gives a religious interpretation of the disease saying that it was the punishment of God upon the people. He says in his sermon:

“For plague is the flail of God and the world His threshing-floor, and implacably Hell thresh out His harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff. There will be more chaff than the wheat, few chosen of the many called. Yet this calamity was not willed by God. Too long this world of ours has connived forgiveness”. (ibid. II, 91)

As the situation worsens, people start to react in very odd ways. They avoid human contact in the fear of getting affected by the disease. They lose faith in religion. But gradually, a great change is observed among the citizens and the authorities of Oran. The death of Jacques, Judge Othon's young son, shakes the people and awakens them from deep sleep. Dr. Rieux is also very disturbed by his death and he even confronts Father Paneloux and questions him how he would justify the suffering and ultimately the death of a small kid as a God's punishment. This confrontation shakes the Father too. Even he is a changed man after Jacques death.

Cottard, who used to live alone and in isolation, is suspected of his actions by Grand, when he tries to know more about him:

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“But Cottard was a silent, secretive man, with something about him that that made Grand think of a wild boar. Cottard seemed to have a preference for gangster films. But the thing that had struck him most about the man was his aloofness, not to say his mistrust of everyone he met.” (ibid, 52)

Cottard too changes at the time of plague. He becomes more social than usual and tries to make friends. But he does this with a selfish purpose. He uses the situation of crisis as an opportunity to make money. He starts selling cigarettes and cheap liquor at a much higher rate than usual.

Judge Othon also changes drastically after his son’s death. Earlier he was rude and very unkind towards everyone, even his family members. But his son’s Jacques death makes him a changed man. He becomes very soft and also participates in helping the people during the plague, but unfortunately dies because of the disease.

Rambert, the journalist comes to Oran to make a report on the living conditions prevailing amongst the Arab population. But Dr. Rieux refuses to give him any information as he feels that the information would surely be distorted before being published. So, he asks him to cover the news of the large number of dying rats in the city. Rambert stays at Oran but is trapped when the epidemic hits and the town is isolated from its neighbouring places. Everything is shut down. He tries to escape from the city, he even pleads Dr. Rieux to sign for him a letter stating that he is not infected and is allowed to leave the town. But when Dr. Rieux also denies, he gives up all hope of escaping and meeting his wife. Finally he accepts the situation and stays in the town to help Dr. Rieux and the others in fighting against the disease.

Through the characters and the changing situation that is brought about by the disease, we observe how the people of Oran are affected by the disease. They are affected when a young boy dies of the plague and then they realize that their personal happiness is unimportant, because death can take away anybody anytime. But, they also realize that they cannot just sit in their homes and await death, they will have to come out of their personal

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spaces and fight against it, together. Only then they will be able to win the war against the dreaded disease, *The Plague*.

Conclusion

In the novel, Camus tries to give a message to his readers. Through his characters, he tries to say that even during hard times, when people lose faith in God and religion, they should believe in humanity alone. When plague hits Oran, when even the doctors and the authorities are not sure that the disease is plague, and are unaware of its intensity, the people are also indifferent towards the sufferings of each other because they are very engrossed in their own pain and suffering brought by the disease. However, as the situation worsens, and their suffering rises, they become less concerned of their selfishness. They are affected by the pain of others. They believe that the epidemic is not of one individual, not of the rich or the poor, but of the entire population of Oran. Hence they come together to help each other and fight against the plague. Camus leaves his readers with a positive thought that no matter how hopeless a situation might seem to be, but there is always an opportunity to fight against the odds and come out victorious. At the end of the novel, we see that only humanity wins because the people learn their lessons from the sufferings of each other.

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