

Meaning Amidst Pandemic: Existential Exploration of Albert Camus's *The Plague*

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Abstract

*A multitude of disasters and epidemics have plagued human history all over the world since time immemorial. In every era of human history, pandemics have profoundly impacted human existence. As a cataclysmic event, it serves as a poignant backdrop for examining existentialism which is a philosophical movement that emphasizes individual experience, freedom, and the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent world. The existential dimension of pandemic literature acknowledges the intricate tapestry woven by authors to grapple with the complexities of life in the face of widespread disease as a way of survival. This research paper delves into the existential dimensions of pandemic literature, focusing on Albert Camus's *The Plague*. Characters in pandemic literature often find themselves in situations where traditional structures and societal norms crumble, leaving them to forge their paths. This study further aims to explore the philosophical underpinnings of existentialism in literary responses to pandemics as well as also seeks to elucidate the existential aspects of the human experience by contemplating questions of meaning, purpose, mortality, and suffering in the face of crisis.*

INTRODUCTION

The present is “haunted” by the past and the past is modeled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present.

(Assmann 9)

Human civilization has been subjected to upheaval from time to time. It is not unusual for these disturbances to be minor, as these are cataclysmic and have long-lasting effects, leading to life being altered forever. After such a crisis, two worlds are born that are completely at odds with one another. Human civilization and disease are inextricably linked, as numerous

pestilences have spread over time to become epidemics and pandemics. A pandemic, comes from the Greek words, ‘pan’ meaning ‘all’ and ‘demos’ meaning ‘people,’ transcends the boundaries of nations and continents, spreading its shadow over humanity. Unlike an epidemic, which may wreak havoc on a specific region, a pandemic engulfs the globe, indicating both biological destruction and significant social disruption. It is an unrelenting force which shakes the foundation of society by challenging the vulnerabilities of human civilization. A pandemic is a biological crisis that affects everybody, regardless of their race or

nation of origin. It is an epidemiological phenomenon characterized by the widespread and sustained transmission of a novel infectious agent. People across the globe have sustained profound effects from pandemics, which are expected to have far-reaching impacts on the future of communities, public health, and global economies.

These past destructive outbreaks, such as the Black Death, cholera, Spanish flu, smallpox, influenza, AIDS, and most recently COVID-19 have transformed and reconfigured cultural, social, and economic lives in unprecedented and unimaginable ways. Amid such crises, it is necessary to reflect on past disasters and how societies and communities have responded to such catastrophes.

Throughout the annals of history, pandemics have etched indelible marks upon the tapestry of human experience. With every outbreak having an eternal impact on societies worldwide, pandemics have significantly transformed the global outlook and emphasized susceptibility to infectious diseases. The Black Death of the 14th century, a dreadful specter of bubonic plague, ravaged Europe's population and destroyed feudal structures, ushering crucial transformations in society and the economy. The 1918 influenza outbreak, often termed the 'Spanish Flu,' swept across the globe in the aftermath of the great war, claiming millions of lives and altering the 20th century. The HIV/AIDS pandemic emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, a lingering crisis that redefined public health paradigms and social attitudes toward illness and stigma. The most recent COVID-19 pandemic, a testament to the interconnected nature of our modern world, has once again reminded humanity of its vulnerability, prompting unprecedented global responses and re-evaluations of social priorities. Walsh in his paper (2020) contends that during the COVID-19 pandemic, many people suffered multiple losses, including traumatizing deaths, isolation, and loss of contact with others, loss of employment, livelihood, and financial security, that shattered hopes and dreams.

Pandemics, as cataclysmic events, have prompted authors to explore human suffering, resilience, and meaninglessness. Through their narratives, these writers have documented the

existential dilemmas and social disruptions brought forth by these resilient natural forces. In the literature of all genres, the meaning of life has been explored from various perspectives and manners, but there is only one crude and rough line between the primitive idea of exploring life's meaning and the neonate or postmodernist idea. During the latter period of life, the sense of life is deciphered according to its reality and purpose, whereas in the former one, man is faced with the dilemma of restoring, preserving, and securing its essence. By emphasizing the importance and value of life, existentialist thinking focuses most on an individual and the experiences that shape him, enabling him to live his life in the most sincere and thorough manner possible. Existentialism attempts to construct an understanding of human existence and its meaning based on self-created standards for measuring morals and values. Schnell T. posits in her paper *Existential Indifference: Another Quality of Meaning in Life* (2010) that existential indifference is characterized by low meaningfulness disconnected from meaningful crisis.

Pandemic literature provides a profound exploration of human survival amid existential crises, delving into the intricate facets of the human experience when confronted with global health emergencies. In light of previous pandemic traumas and survival in situations beyond control, literature has an essential role in guiding individual's responses to such catastrophes. The literature written on pandemics poses the blueprint contemplation of what happens to our society and inspires people to move forward in the most strenuous times. Pandemic literature often serves as an archive of common anxieties, ensuring readers with a cathartic journey through the intricacies of human life. The narratives unravel within a tapestry of fear, loss, and uncertainty, weaving together individual stories that reflect the broader societal response to existential threats. Through protagonists navigating the treacherous terrain of pandemics, these works invite readers to confront their mortality and question the foundations of their identity in a world fraught with peril. S. Jones in *Literature: A Useful Tool for the Philosophical Counselor During a Pandemic*. (2020) asserts that good literature complements

philosophical readings, and the urgency of living one's best life is manifested more acutely. In addition, she maintains that despite literature and philosophy exploring how one should live in such times, the novels written at the time are more prevailing than those written elsewhere.

The pandemic is an existential crisis that has highlighted the frailty of human existence, creating a fertile ground for the examination of existentialism in literature. An existential crisis is a psychological episode in which an individual questions the meaning of their life and doubts his own existence. With the arrival of a pandemic, uncertainties become the only reality, and existentialist thought becomes prevalent throughout literature. Literature capturing existential delirium is rich in accounts where existence becomes the painful experience that stems from the depravity of hope and an examination of humanity's ongoing trauma caused by nature's invisible force devouring humanity's intricate texture. Malpas in his work *Existentialism as Literature* (2012) proposed existentialism in literature as a manifestation in those literary works that figure within existential crisis, to see how existentialism emerges philosophically, yet also literarily. Themes of isolation, meaninglessness, a pervasive sense of uncertainty, and the fragility of human existence permeate pandemic literature, echoing the core tenets of existentialist philosophy. Chowdhury in his paper (2020) points out that when pandemic crises occur, existential approaches and paradigms emerge forcefully to address the absurdity of life, death, and the impact on daily life.

Albert Camus's *The Plague* is portrayed as a profound exploration of existentialism within the backdrop of chaos and suffering which indicates the sudden outbreak of a deadly plague, disrupting the normalcy of everyday life. Camus confronts the inexplicable and meaningless nature of the epidemic in Oran, questioning the purpose of life in the midst of overwhelming odds. The narrative becomes a platform for existential contemplation, challenging characters and readers to confront the absurdity of life and the inevitability of death. Dr Bernard Rieux, the protagonist of the story, emerges as an emblem of resistance and resilience and chooses to battle the plague even

in the absence of a clear victory. However, this endless defeat won't stop Dr Rieux from fighting against the illness, as he tells Tarrou, "But that is not a reason to give up the struggle" (Camus 98). Therefore, the plague places Oran's entire population in a state of collective pain, exile, separation, and morality which leads to a collective resistance and struggle on the part of the inhabitants of the city, revealing their real or ethical morals. Camus writes:

One must fight, in one way or another, and not go down on one's knees. The whole question was to prevent the largest possible number of people from dying and suffering a definitive separation. There was only one way to do this, which was to fight the plague. (Camus 102)

A pandemic is microscopic as it is not only invisible to people in real life, but it is also in their imagination. Elizabeth Outka in *Viral Modernism* (2019) contends that the pandemic had it all: sensual, pathological, and microscopic dangers. She further maintains that the pandemic is "a hidden force that has been there all along, exerting weight and influence" (Outka 3). The exploration of existential themes in pandemic literature goes beyond mere survival; it delves into the profound realms of philosophical inquiry. Through Rieux's journey and the experiences of other characters, Camus crafts a narrative that invites reflection on the nature of morality, the significance of human connections, and the pursuit of meaning amidst the chaos of a world plagued by suffering. Tony Judt mentions in his *Introduction to The Plague* (2002) "disease, separation, and exile are conditions that come upon us unexpectedly and unbidden....they are an illustration of what Camus meant by the 'absurdity' of human condition" (Judt 10).

The Plague stands as a timeless work that encourages readers to deal with the complexities of existence and find meaning amid life's uncertainties. The novel serves as a philosophical exploration of the human situation, illustrating the struggle for significance amidst the arbitrary and often indifferent nature of existence. Dr Rieux embodies the existential dilemma as he confronts the inexplicable outbreak of the

plague, prompting deep introspection and a quest for meaning. The characters in the novel navigate the chaos with varying responses, reflecting the diversity of human reactions to the absurdity of life. In the book the absurdity lies in how the plague defies logic, punishes both innocent and guilty, and exposes the randomness of life. The outbreak itself represents the absurd condition of human life as people seek meaning but the world remains indifferent. The Narrator notes “the plague had swallowed up everything and everyone” (Camus 161). In his vibrant portrayals of the human spirit in the face of adversity, Camus’s work invites readers to reflect on existential questions that arise when faced with the unpredictability of life. Camus writes, “each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth is free from it” (Camus 242). According to Vulliamy (2015), Camus’s *The Plague* describes vividly a cohabitation and simultaneous confrontation of death in epic proportion, while having humanity coexist with death. He further notices that Camus brings out the need for humans to carry on existing in this world while facing adversity “Camus offers us a way of abandoning our pointless quest for “oneness” with ourselves, but carrying on nevertheless, fighting: For some ill-defined moral justice, even though we have ceased to be able to define it” (Vulliamy 1).

Camus suggests that while life is inherently meaningless individuals must still take responsibility for their actions and strive to create meaning through their choices. *The Plague*’s Existentialist hero Dr Bernard Rieux chooses to fight despite knowing that his efforts ultimately be futile. His sense of duty is not imposed by external forces but arises from his moral responsibility. As mentioned, “I have no idea what's awaiting me, or what will happen when all this ends. For the moment I know this; there are sick people and they need curing.” (Camus 123). Jean Tarrou, another character chooses to resist suffering because of personal ethics. His decision to help with the sanitation squads is an assertion of his existential freedom and moral responsibility. Freedom and responsibility are the foundational concepts in existentialist thought and take on a renewed significance in pandemic literature. Characters contend with choices that affect not only their

own well-being but also their collective welfare. The ethical dimensions of decision-making become magnified as individuals navigate the complex interplay between personal freedom and the responsibility to safeguard the health and safety of the broader community.

Mortality is another central theme in existentialist philosophy which is a poignant aspect of pandemic literature. Authors confront the stark reality of death and often employ it as a catalyst for characters to deal with the significance of their lives. Characters demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness, embodying the existentialist idea that, even in the face of adversity, individuals confront challenges and forge new meanings. One of the primary causes of existential dread in *The Plague* is the randomness and unpredictability of death. The people of Oran initially refuse to acknowledge the severity of the plague but as the disease spreads they are consumed by fear. Camus describes this growing sense of dread with accepting the fact of being cut off from the outside world but with the passing of time, a mood of listlessness settled on the town, and the keenest anxiety began to be felt. Another prevalent motif is the depiction of isolation and the examination of individual experiences in the face of social distancing measures. Characters often find themselves physically cut off from others, mirroring the nature of human connection and the intrinsic loneliness that existentialist thinkers have long contemplated. Many characters, such as Dr Rieux and journalist Rambert, struggle with the existential dread of being cut off from their loved ones. This enforced separation from loved ones and the broader community becomes a canvas for authors to explore the existential solitude that accompanies the human condition. Camus expressed people’s suffering as a twofold grief—that which everyone has to bear, and a personal sorrow, felt by themselves only.

Existentialism, as a philosophical framework, has exerted a discernible influence on pandemic literature, contributing to a nuanced exploration of the human condition in the face of life-threatening disease. Rooted in the works of existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and other existentialist thinkers, this philosophical

paradigm underscores the individual's responsibility for constructing meaning in an indifferent or absurd world. The early 19th-century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, regarded as the father of existentialism believed that the individual is solely responsible for giving meaning to his or her life and living it passionately and sincerely regardless of the obstacles and distractions present, including despair, angst, absurdity, choice, boredom, and death. In the realm of pandemic literature, existentialism manifests itself in the examination of profound questions related to human existence, purpose, and the nature of suffering. With conventional routines disrupted and societal norms in flux, characters undergo a profound reevaluation of their values and priorities. The quest for meaning becomes both a personal and collective endeavour, reflecting the existentialist notion that individuals must actively create their own purpose in a seemingly indifferent world. In this sense, *The Plague*, even in the consistent havoc of the absurd sickness, "dramatizes the victory of human spirit and solidarity over that which would threaten and dismember it: a plague, an enemy occupation, existence itself" (Gary 165).

The pervasive uncertainty surrounding the pandemic serves as fertile ground for existentialist exploration. Authors delve into the anxiety and fear that arise when confronted with the unpredictability of life and the fragility of societal structures. The constant threat of illness and death forces characters and, by extension, readers to confront their mortality, echoing existentialist ponderings on the inevitability of human finitude. The telling of stories is a constant reminder that sense still exists somewhere, that even in an environment devoid of meaning there is in some way meaning within our invented narratives. As Ingram (2016) highlights, the constant threat of a pandemic has equally impacted morality and confusion has arisen as to how to perceive, respond to and define meaning in the face of this new threat. Existentialist literature within the pandemic context encapsulates the examination of subjective experiences and moral dilemmas, whereas characters may confront the fragility of life, the arbitrariness of fate, and the ethical challenges. Existentialism, with its emphasis on

individual responsibility and the quest for meaning, permeates pandemic literature, providing a philosophical lens and offering an exploration of the profound existential questions. Slochower, H (1948) believes existentialism reveals the essence of being within the life one lives and how one interacts with the world.

Pestilences have marked a ubiquitous stamp on the minds of people. Once they begin to feel the grip of the pandemic, people try their utmost to make sense of the nightmare that has suddenly become a reality. Cardiff in his work *The Pandemic Perhaps: Dramatic Events in a Public Culture of Danger* (2015), argues that pandemics perpetuate a culture of existential threat as he mentioned "The feeling of fear associated with the exposure to an existential threat, is at the heart of modern social contract" (Cardiff 189). It is at these times that the prospect of death and how one will leave this world becomes acute, along with the search for meaning and medicinal remedies. The most critical pandemic facet that directly impacted people is the psychological one. Being surrounded by an invisible virus that has no track or treatment was bewildering. As the pandemic progresses, people suffer from an existential crisis and are afraid that the pandemic could mean the end of the world. People seek out solace wherever they can. Some are turning to religion and are being exhorted to repent for their sins. The same feeling has afflicted people amid the COVID-19 pandemic as it was "a deeply existential issue that fundamentally changes people" (Van Tongeren 1). Alongside, the hold of superstition has strengthened, and the rumour mill works tirelessly as an unmanageable mass of information about protection against the contagion and miracle cures proliferates everywhere.

CONCLUSION

In the realm of pandemic literature, existentialism emerges as a poignant and thought-provoking lens to explore the human experience amid crisis. The pervasive uncertainties, isolation, and collective anxiety inherent in a pandemic mirror the core tenets of existential philosophy. Authors grapple with the

absurdity of life as they navigate the chaos of a global health crisis, questioning the meaning and purpose of an individual's existence. The narratives delve into the search for identity and authenticity amidst the backdrop of widespread fear and uncertainty. Characters confront their mortality dealing with the fragility of human existence, mirroring the existentialist emphasis on personal responsibility and the creation of one's own meaning. As the world collectively faces the impermanence of life, pandemic literature becomes a canvas for exploring existential themes, bringing readers to reflect on the human choices that shape their identity in the face of unprecedented challenges. Literature helps to navigate through the pandemic by fostering our mental, moral, and critical faculties. One can say that literature has come to the rescue of many as during the lockdown people are reading the pandemic literature. Man has made many technological advancements, but pandemics have had the last laugh by wiping out millions of lives despite his best efforts. The pandemic literature delves into human affairs and the reconnoitered information marks the pages of history.

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