

THE RELEVANCE OF ALBERT CAMUS IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Albert Camus was a French philosopher, thinker, writer and journalist from Algeria. He had witnessed both the world wars and was part of the French Resistance army fighting against Nazi occupation of France during 1940-45. Along with Nietzsche, Kirkegaard, and Sartre, Camus was called an Existentialist. However, he rejected the label and reiterated that he belonged to the Absurd school of philosophy. He felt life had become meaningless and hopelessness was seen everywhere. The war itself was absurd as killing of innocents could not be justified by any just cause. Life was capricious because the universe was irrational. The interaction between the rational human being and the irrational universe produced the absurdity in life. Among his works three of his seminal works have been chosen for discussion in this essay. The novel he wrote in 1946, *The Plague*, The essay he wrote in 1942 of *Myth of Sisyphus* and the lecture he delivered to an audience in New York in 1946 titled “The Human Crisis.” In the world today, when terror has gripped humanity and made life more and more uncertain; the outbreak of a strange virus that became a pandemic in 2020-2021 killing more people than any war has done so far, Camus’ philosophy and novel has become increasingly meaningful as well as relevant

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On March 28, 1946, Albert Camus the Algerian French Philosopher, journalist, thinker and writer, was invited to give a lecture in the New York theatre. The title of the lecture was "The Human Crisis" and the subtitle was 'Lessons from the French Resistance against Nazi Germany'. Writing after four years of Nazi occupation of France, and the Second World War having just ended, Camus said: "No cause justifies the murder of innocents." The lecture of 1946, was re-enacted by the actor, Viggo Mortensen, in the same place, seventy years later, in 2016. The content of the speech seemed relevant now as it had been in 1946. The condition of the human being remains the same: gripped in a fear of the random events happening in his life and all around him, so that it takes away the meaning and focus of his existence. Camus called this Absurd. There is an inherent randomness about life in general. For instance, the evil man flourishes and the good man suffers. Covid-19 infected and killed some, while it left some others alive. There are many such things than cannot be predicted in this world. This Camus calls the Absurdity of our existence.

According to Camus, our lives are marked by hopelessness. Lot of times we hope for things. Sometimes they are fulfilled, sometimes it is not. When we look at life for the centrality of hope, the answer is such that life does not give a definite affirmation. Due to this unpredictability, it is an error to say that 'everyone needs something to hope for.' To Camus hope is a kind of deflection away from the deeper reality that there is randomness in life and therefore it fails to provide a fulfillment of that hope. We are lost in an ocean of randomness. The universe is by itself irrational. The absurdity arises out of the interaction of the rational human with the irrational universe.

Life is essentially without meaning as the universe is irrational. A Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl,¹ a Psychologist says that "meaning is about determining some goal in life which you think is worthwhile and pursuing it as best as you can." However, most of the time what confers meaning, does not come true. So there is hopelessness and meaninglessness in life. Amidst all this Camus tells to take life as it is. Hope and meaning are deflections away from this. Life is random, and therefore we should not pin any hope on it. This randomness is part and parcel of life. Life is capricious. This we don't wish to recognize. But, Camus asks us to accept it. For him the world which is real is not desirable.

In his 1946 lecture Camus speaks boldly that a human crisis has gripped the whole world in

the post war era. War has shown that there is no morality that can save humanity. Brute force is the indicator of success and the world follows the successful man. The people who lived through the war loved neither war nor violence. Human death became a matter of numbers. Humanity has become indifferent to death. Camus believes that it is easy to say that since Hitler has died the venom has gone. But vestiges of it remain in each one of us. It is a hatred that survives within countries, nations, communities, and against each other.

There are three symptoms that Camus identifies as indicating the human crisis in the world. The first is the rise of terror which in itself is a consequence of the perversion of values. The consequence of war is the fall out of refugees and asylum-seekers fleeing their homeland for safety and survival. The problem of war refugees was at its highest during the Syrian conflict during 2014-2016. Zahara Schara², a Syrian writer in her debut novel titled *The Syrian's Story*(2014) writes : “lives had been shattered like mortars mitting buildings”(p.2). In another book co-authored by Gulwali Passerlay³ and Nadene Ghouri, named *The Lightless Sky* (2016) narrates the story of a twelve –year old boy who was forced to flee Afghanistan during the Taliban war and made a terrifying journey through Pakistan to reach Britain where he was adopted and educated. He was forcefully sent away by his mother after his father was killed in a gun battle with the U.S army. After the Holocaust and the World Wars, violence and war continue in many countries involved in geopolitical conflicts. The most recent one being Russia’s aggression of Ukraine. More than four million refugees have fled Ukraine to Poland, Slovakia, Sweden, Britain, and Germany. The sudden attack on Ukraine by Russian Federation in February 2022 was a horror that country cannot forget because they were totally unaware and unprepared for the war. They had to hide in underground bunkers and afterwards flee across the borders to other nearby countries, leaving behind their homes and properties. File photos show most of the residential buildings in Ukraine bombed into debris. The war crimes committed in some places like Buccha are too horrifying to be spoken about.

This affirms Camus first symptom of the Human Crisis- the terror that has gripped man. The miserable man lives in constant fear that he will die anytime. One cannot live a meaningful life under these circumstances. Fear must be lifted from humanity, for man to grow in freedom of thought. The second symptom of the human crisis is in replacing the real with printed matter: rise of bureaucracy. There are stamped papers required for everything, whether travelling,

hospitalization, or school admissions. "It is only when the bread is over that the bread coupons are given out." ⁴ With so much offices, formalities, one is cast away from the real: one lives in solitude. Bureaucracy is expanding everywhere. We are creating a world where human want has disappeared. The third symptom is replacing real men with political men. Everything is collective. Human suffering is no longer considered a scandal. It is only one variable in a reckoning. There is impossibility in persuasion. For instance, the victim in the concentration camp cannot stop his torturer by persuasion. One no longer dies, suffers, except by proxy. There are papers and numbers for everything. Individual passion is no longer possible: only, abstract or collective formalities. These different symptoms can be considered as a cult of efficiency. This is the crisis we face and are still facing. We have no values except the absurdity of it all.

There was no principle, says Camus, with which we could repudiate terror. Nothing is right or wrong. Not even Hitler. If Hitler had won the war, history would have paid him homage. One can honour the dead or throw them into the garbage. Right is determined by success. Some said that the Second World War was to dissolve nationalism and move towards a universal world view. Nothing happened. The rule of the day is only to be efficient-- there is no right or wrong. Efficiency is what matters the most in today's world.

The world today is no longer divided into the just and unjust. It is the masters and the slaves status quo. Inside every nation is the craze for power, and it is creating a future that is terrible. We have to respond to the symptoms of the human crisis by changing it through communication. Silence is bondage. It is the act of communication to oppose murderers and terrorists. We must call things by their name. We must reject the fatalistic attitude which makes us accept all this as inevitable. It is important to work towards liberating the world from the perpetrators of terror. The third thing is to put politics back in its place: a secondary thing. The role of politics is to keep things in order, not to take away our inner freedom. The fourth thing is to remove negative thinking. The fifth thing is to bring about a universal brotherhood. Nobody in this world should have the right to impose their truth upon others as Hitler did.

Camus refused to be labelled an Existentialist alongside, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Sartre. Although, his philosophy did touch upon the meaninglessness of existence, he affirmed that it was not the 'Nothingness'⁵ which Sartre spoke about, instead it was the absurdum of existence

and the way forward within such absurdity that he was concerned about. He called himself an Absurdist along with Beckett, Kafka, and Martin Esslin. In a seminal essay he wrote and published in 1942 titled *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus describes Sisyphus as the absurd hero. The story of Sisyphus, once the King of Ephyra, now Corinth, is given by the god Zeus for escaping death twice with his cunningness. The punishment for Sisyphus is to roll a huge boulder uphill. As soon as he manages to reach it on top, it would come rolling down, and Sisyphus would come down the hill to roll it up again. This was an eternal labour he was condemned to. This repetitive task of Sisyphus, was to Camus a metaphor of the human existence. The vivid imagery of someone condemned to repeat endlessly a futile task has resonated as an allegory of the human condition. It represents humanity's endless search for meaning in life which according to Camus flows like water between our fingers. We can never grasp it in our hands. The loss of meaning in our lives is due to a universe which acts irrationally. The good people suffer, while the bad flourish. This randomness makes life absurd. But instead of despairing, Camus imagined Sisyphus meeting his fate defiantly as he walks down the hill to begin his task again. In our daily lives too we are engaged in the same schedules and routines, day after day. So we too are the prototype of Sisyphus.

In order to deal with the absurdity in life Camus suggests three ways. The first is to commit a physical suicide. In this way we can opt out of a repetitive existence. The second way is to take a leap of faith. But putting our trust in some divine power/God/ Presence outside our own selves we can face the randomness or unpredictability of life with equanimity. The third way is what Camus advocates. This is 'existential defiance' that Sisyphus exhibited while coming down the hill to begin his task again. This is to accept the absurd and be happy in the moment, not looking at the end. In other words, Sisyphus rolling the boulder, up the hill, is happier doing the work the work, than reacting thinking of the final result of it rolling down. So even if the daily struggles are repetitive and seem absurd, the clue is to live for the moment, giving every action a value and significance, not looking at the end.

Albert Camus' novel *The Plague* published in 1947, tells the story of the outbreak of a plague outbreak in a coastal city of Algeria, Oran. Although, Camus had not experienced a plague in his life, he gathered his source material from the Cholera epidemic that swept over Oran in 1536. Oran was also decimated by the bubonic plague in 1556 and 1678. Later outbreaks of

1921, 1931, 1944, were all far from the scale of the epidemic described in the novel.

The novel is considered an existentialist classic, despite Camus' objection to the label. The novel emphasizes the powerlessness of the individual characters to affect their destinies. The narrative tone is similar to Kafka's, especially in *The Trial* (1914-15, 1925). Like Kafka's novel, Camus' novel also uses sentences that have potentially multiple meanings that often resonate as stark allegory of phenomenal consciousness and the human condition. The novel has been read as an allegorical treatment of the French Resistance to Nazi occupation of France during 1940-45. It became a bestseller during the pandemic times of Covid-19 in 2020-2021. Britain's publisher Penguin Classics reported struggling with the overwhelming demand for the novel. As countries in the world went into lockdown, the quarantine condition of Oran during the plague was seen as being similar to the condition all over the world. Camus' daughter, Catherine said that the message of the novel had found relevance in the pandemic period, because we also realized that "we are not responsible for coronavirus, but we can be responsible in the way we respond to it."

Camus locates his fiction *The Plague*(1946) in the coastal city of Oran , in Algeria.Oran is a city like anywhere else. Camus' narrator tells us: "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' "(3). Like any other place the Oranians are completely unprepared when rats begin emerging in droves in streets and laneways. Then, men, women, and children start to fall ill with fever, difficulties in breathing and fatal blisters. Like many nations in 2020, the people of Oran do not believe in pestilence. So they are slow to comprehend the enormity of the disease. As the numbers of afflicted rise, emergency measures have to be taken. Oran's commercial harbour is closed to sea traffic. The city gates are shut. Sporting competitions cease. Beach bathing is prohibited.. Soon food shortages emerge. Some turn profiteers, preying on the desperate ones. Anyone showing symptoms of the disease is isolated. Houses, entire suburbs, and schools are locked down. Hospitals become overwhelmed. The main protagonist, a doctor by the name of Bernard Rieux along with his friends Tarrou, Grand and Ranbart, organise teams of volunteers to administer serums and ensure the sick are quickly diagnosed and hospitalised.

Epidemics make exiles of people in their own countries, says the narrator of the novel.

Separation, isolation, loneliness, boredom and repetition become the shared fate of all. In Oran, as we saw in many countries during the pandemic, funerals are banned; church worship is abandoned; there is no gathering of celebration whether marriage or baptism. The living can no longer bid farewell to their loved one who has died infected with the disease.

It soon becomes clear that Camus regards the “plague” as a metaphorical plight of all of us, since we all eventually have to face our own death. “Each of us has the plague within us “ says Torrou. But Camus’ characters face the harsh reality with defiance and resistance. The town folks form ‘sanitary squads’ to help victims. The important message the novel gives is that ‘death may eventually await all of us, but together we can fight the best we can to delay each one’. Camus offers, in particular, a path forward out of the darkness, by emphasizing his faith in humanity and the solidarity amidst a crisis. “On this earth there are pestilences and there are victims,” surmises Torrou, “ and it’s up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilence”(65). As Dr. Rieux bears witness to the events of the plague-stricken Oran, he realises the importance of courage, which represents the difference between being swallowed up by the plague or prevailing over it.

As things eventually, slowly return to normalcy, and people resume their daily lives, Camus describes a sense of comradeship that persists among the people of Oran. They are now bonded better with the common knowledge of what they have endured together. Thus Camus’ novel shows us the path of sympathy in these troubling times or as Rieux says, “a loveless world, is a dead world.”

Camus’ prescient account of life under conditions of an epidemic works on different levels opines Mathew Sharpe in his essay. The Plague is a transparent allegory of the Nazi occupation of France beginning in Spring 1940. The sanitary teams reflect Camus’ experiences in, and admiration for, the resistance against the “brown plague” of fascism. Camus’ title also evokes the way the Nazis characterized those they targeted for extermination as a pestilence. The shadow of the Holocaust darkens the pages of *The Plague*.

When death rates become so great that individual burials are no longer possible, as in scenes we witnessed a year ago, the people of Oran also, dug collective graves into which: “the naked, somewhat contorted bodies were slid into a pit almost side by side, then covered with a layer

of quicklime and another of earth...so as to leave space for subsequent consignments” (95). The closing lines of the novel *The Plague* warn mankind: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-closets; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city. There is nevertheless truth in the description of Camus’ classic. In the end, the plague dissipates as it had begun. The novel closes amid scenes of festivity and jubilation. Camus’ narrator concludes that confronting the plague has taught him that, for all of the horrors he has witnessed, “there are more things to admire in men than to despise”(72).

It is this that concerns him about the world as he speaks to the audience in New York in 1946. When he identifies the terror that has gripped the world, he also suggests the way forward. It is one of Existential defiance: a scorn at the bad things that happen in life. This was the attitude of Sisyphus coming down the hill to roll the rock uphill again. Another illustration Camus gives is of a prisoner imprisoned for some reason of which he himself feels is unjust. To show anger would be akin to reacting the way the enemy wanted. If you kill yourself, that too would be a victory for the enemy. But if you showed happiness, then it would be the most defiant response to your situation. It will negate the condemnation. Camus also mentions the incident of Timothy Leary,⁶ a Harvard Professor who was doing research on LSD. When the substance was declared illegal, Leary was put into isolation cell in the prison. After serving few years, when he was released he declared: “Prison was the best vacation I could have had. Especially solitary confinement as I got time away from the busy life of a celebrity.” This is the defiance Camus refers to. Real defiance in the macrocosm of existence might not take the form of suicide or misery; but to be lucidly aware of all that and find ways to be happy in that situation; this business of defiance is what keeps suicide away from being the solution in the face of the absurd. Suicide is a kind of escape from existence and diametrically opposite to defiance.

Camus’ *The Plague* is also a metaphor for the force of what Dr. Rieux calls “abstraction” in our lives: all those impersonal rules and processes which can make human beings statistics to be treated by governments with all the inhumanity characterizing epidemics. Nevertheless, the novel can also be read as a ‘sermon of hope’. Camus’ belief is that under extreme circumstances

ordinary people can rise up to perform extraordinary tasks. In Oran as in the 2020s we saw people doing everything possible to help the sick, the weary, the suffering. The health care workers, and professionals are the heroes and heroines of the pandemic as much as all those who helped the sick or the dead.

REFERENCES

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