

Absurdity in camus's the plague

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Albert Camus tried to make sense of plague's challenge to the human spirit in this novel set in North Africa. It is a chronicle of human suffering. " But what does that mean - 'plague'? Just life, no more than that." (Camus, Gilbert 1948 : 307).

The old asthmatic, who spends his days transferring peas from one pan to another, summarizes the overarching theme of Camus's narrative: life and death, in a world that does not seem to care for us. *The Plague* is a powerful literary work, despite its many logical and other shortcomings, which we will be looking into. Camus is obviously trying to stimulate the reader to think about the problems of life and ways to confront life in a seemingly absurd and cruel world — although how far he succeeds in this attempt is doubtful.

Over the course of a few days in sometime in the 1940s, in the Algerian city of Oran, thousands of rats emerge into the streets in dying conditions. At this point begins the outbreak. Absurdity creeps into Camus's story in more ways than one. Dying rats and the spread of bubonic plague is not an unprecedented phenomenon in human history. In the mid 14th century, the devastating black plague exterminated nearly one third of the population of Europe. Spanning three years, it was a disaster of colossal proportions.

A major episode of Bubonic plague occurred in ancient Greece, as well as in the late Roman period, killing people in hundreds of thousands. The narrator of the story himself acknowledges the fact of a ten thousand people dying every single day in Constantinople. Therefore, on the first sign of rats dying en masse, all the nations and international authorities would be alerted, not just the city officials. But that does not strangely happen in Camus's account. No action is taken at all for a long time, though much hullabaloo goes on.

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The *Plague* recounts a specific (albeit fictional) epidemic taking place in a particular location at a particular time, although the year is not clearly specified. Therefore historical and practical questions are important in making sense of the story.

Camus's novel was published in 1947, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. It is reasonable therefore to assume that the Oran episode might have occurred towards the end of the war or in the first years of peace. Towards the end of the First World War, a massive outbreak of Influenza pandemic killed an estimated 40 million people worldwide.

No one would even remotely want such a disaster to happen all over again at the end of the Second World War, and therefore no one would have taken the matter lightly. The moment the news is in the media, it would have sent shivers across the national capitals all over the world. By no stretch of imagination, Bubonic plague can be considered a local issue.

One cannot possibly conceive any city authorities to be complacent over such a grave matter, thereby delaying action and letting the infection take hold in the populace. Leave alone the local authorities, national and international authorities would immediately jump into the scene taking all possible action to contain the burgeoning plague. That a plague is on its way is clear as day from the first deaths of rats to anyone who is least educated, however the city officials go on merely debating, discussing and hesitating.

In 1994, a case of pneumonic plague, a deadlier air-borne version of bubonic plague, broke out in the Northwestern India. The word plague was in the air, and hundreds of thousands of people immediately started evacuating their

houses, even before the authorities could rush into action. In the end, few people died of the actual infection, more people must have perished in the stampedes to catch trains and buses.

In Camus's novel that seeks to question the very meaning of human life and existence, however, no such commonsensical, logical measures are taken.

Common people behave meaninglessly, authorities behave absurdly, international authorities do not even figure in - all this in spite of the narrator, Bernard Rieux, being a doctor himself. Even when the doctor starts worrying, he worries about his own city, not the continent and the world, as if plague knows any city limits. Region-specific infectious diseases such as Ebola infections which break out in West African countries from time to time are called endemics, not epidemics.

According to the novel, one is given to understand that Bernard Rieux is preoccupied with his wife's impending trip to a sanitarium and is therefore at first not alarmed by the rats dying on the streets with blood spurting from their muzzles.

Doctors are always preoccupied with something or other, yet any doctor spotting a number of rats dying in such a ghastly manner would have issued red alert instantaneously. Rats dying by coughing up blood are strangely viewed by every one concerned as a sanitation issue! This is a preposterous way of telling a story.