

The Paroxysm of Pandemics: Human Mutation from Dysphoria to Euphoria

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Abstract

From the earliest times to the present, epidemics or pandemics have affected human history in myriad ways and have forever altered the world order. When Camus says that the plague never dies but waits patiently in bedrooms, trunks, and old papers, he was referring to the paroxysmal nature of pandemics. Every pandemic odyssey seems to follow the same pattern of disarray, bedlam, and mutation. Here, the mutation is not only of the virus but of the humans as well who mutate into more savage, ravenous and disordered beings. Literary imaginations have decoded this human mutation and elucidated that the human mutation however self-centered in the start mutates into an altruistic one in the end because the self cannot exist without the other. In such murky times, literature seems to hold a ray of hope that orients human thoughts from dysphoria to euphoria. The present paper will highlight the illuminating effect of literature that pulls human thoughts back to sanity. The paper will dwell upon *The Plague* by Albert Camus and his theory of Absurdism to prove that pandemics can cripple a human body but not the soul and, in the end, its love and hope that triumph over the pandemic.

Keywords: Pandemic, Mutation, Camus, Absurdity of life.

Introduction

This paper will try to understand the role of pandemics over literary imagination. Many paroxysmal pandemics have invaded the human race, rendering it helpless and shattered to the core. These murky times turn humans into selfish beings further taking us closer to doomsday. In such times, when the winds are damp, summers are sans warmth, and winters

are harsh, literature comes to the rescue of mankind. Writers take a flight of imagination, dive deep into the sea of melancholy, and surface back with the pearls of benevolence, love, and sympathy. The paper aims to look into those works that paint for us the picture of the monster of pestilence, but remain uncrushed under its weight. *The Plague* by Camus will reveal how the survival instinct is the prime force that binds humanity in this struggle turning them into more euphoric beings.

The word pandemic comes from the Greek word "Pandemos" which means an epidemic of an infectious disease that has spread across a large region, multiple continents, affecting a substantial number of people. It must also be contagious. But one thing that we all must remember is that the pandemic may cripple the body but it can't cripple the literary imagination. The present pandemic is not the first of its kind that humans have experienced. We have a history of endemics from epidemics to pandemics which have found a mention not only in historical archives but also in the imagination of literary giants. Many times, pandemics have found a reference in works of literature and sometimes they have ignited the creative fervor through these works. We have examples of many paintings depicting the monstrous effect of a pandemic in various parts of Europe. Giacomo Borlone de Buschis' *Triumph of the Death with the Dance of the Death* in the 15th century, Pieter Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* in the 16th century, Paul Fürst's *Doctor Schnabel* in the 17th century, Arnold Böcklin's *Plague* in the 19th century, and Edvard Munch's *Self-portrait after Spanish Influenza* in the 20th century are some famous paintings that depict human crisis in almost every century.

Works like *The Masque of The Red Death* by Edgar Alan Poe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe, *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann, *The Last Man* by Mary Shelley and in Indian context *The Calcutta Chromosome: a novel of fevers, delirium and discovery* by Amitav Ghosh, *Twilight in Delhi* by Ahmed Ali, *The Abandoned Cemetery at Balasore* by Jayanta Mahapatra are some of the examples which have tried to put forward aesthetically the

plight of humanity in times of pestilence. Munshi Premchand's *Eidgah*, *Doodh ka Daam* and *Rebati* throw light on the spread of cholera and its impact on the social life of the commoners. Rabindranath Tagore's poem *Puritan Bhritya* refers to a smallpox outbreak and thus highlights the elements of human emotions in the moment of crisis. U R Ananthmurthy's *Samskara* has a reference of plague as a pandemic where the plague was a symbol of stagnant orthodox values. Such works are proof of the fact that the bleakest times ignite the brightest of imaginative fires. These great writings have used pandemics as a symbol of hope and survival because the pandemics must not mutate our basic DNA of compassion, love, and generosity no matter how tough the times are.

The earliest example of a pandemic can be traced back to *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles dating back to 430-420 BC. The plague strikes Thebes where it is paradigmatic in the sense that the ruler's crime contaminates the community and societal ill manifests as a literal pestilence. The oracle announces that the plague is religious pollution and the king himself is the cause of the plague. "weltering surge of blood" (line 24), "fiery plague" (line 166), "the land is sore distressed" (line 685), and "wailing on the altar stair, wives and grandmas rend the air, long-drawn moans and piercing cries blent with prayers and litanies" (lines 184-186; 2,3) all illustrate vividly the severity of the situation" (Kousoulis). These words display the creative fervour of the writer who very poignantly paints before the readers the picture of gloomy times. We can realise that during the epidemic the social tranquillity is at its nadir but the literary imagination is at its zenith. The pandemic cannot take a toll on the minds of creative geniuses. So, in a creative field, there is no dearth of imagination as the pandemic cannot dampen the creative souls. Pandemics, however tormenting, cannot stifle the human spirit of ingenuity and creative imagination. Even in despair, there is no dearth of creative enterprise. Hence, dysphoric times generate euphoric writings.

On closer scrutiny of the history of literature, one realises that every pandemic has and will continue to inspire not only literary writers but the readers as well. In literary sagas of

pandemics, the man initially becomes more isolated, more idiotic, more narcissistic, and more opinionated but at the end of the crisis, man learns to become more accessible, more logical, more altruistic, and more open-minded. *The Plague* by Albert Camus is one such example where the initial distress of the disease is depicted through lines, "we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogey of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away. But it doesn't always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is men who pass away...." (Camus 37).

Albert Camus says in *The Plague*, "The plague never dies; it waits patiently in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, handkerchiefs and old papers." The plague or any pandemic since eons have remained shelved like an old forgotten book until when suddenly a new page opens up to tell a new story. Every pandemic odyssey seems to follow the same pattern of confusion, chaos, and mutation. A mutation is not only of the virus but also of the human self. With every pandemic, the *Homo sapiens* tend to mutate into more savage and dispirited mutants. But literary flights of imagination have examined the dysphoric mutation and tried to acquaint human thoughts to euphoria.

The Plague is a philosophical novel dealing with Absurdism which holds that the universe is absurd and life meaningless like the futile struggle of Sisyphus repeatedly rolling the boulder up and down the hill. In the novel, the town Oran becomes a microcosm of the universe and the characters illustrate different ways human beings deal with absurdity. Cottard tries to commit suicide; Paneloux loses his faith and succumbs to the disease. Human beings are vulnerable to being randomly exterminated at any time, by a virus or action of fellow beings. *The Plague*, "rules out any future, cancels journeys, and silences the exchange of views. People fancy themselves to be free but, no one will ever be free as long as there is pestilence"(Sara Beth West). Plague or for that matter any pandemic presents slackness, incompetency, and self-centered motives of those in power and the sole reason that instigates the fury of the masses. Camus' writing transports us to that dystopian land where all is not right with the world and people are in a state of dysphoria. The empty streets and paranoia

engulf the city. The gloomy bleak images are enough to immerse the readers in the sea of despondency.

One must remember that such dejected times are just a harbinger of hope and new world order. Henry Kissinger, an American diplomat, had argued, "Our age is insistently, at times almost desperately, in pursuit of a concept of world order. Chaos threatens side by side with unprecedented interdependence...."(Micklethwait). At the micro-level of individual life and macro-level of world order, the importance lies in interdependence or taking on this challenge together to attain a harmonious world order. Similarly, a revival of camaraderie can be anticipated when Camus says, "...once the faintest stirring of hope became possible, the dominion of plague was ended" (Camus 272). We have to realise that such lines towards the end of the novel transport the readers from dysphoric to euphoric state making them realise that at the end it is survival that matters. Being alive is and will always remain an emergency and nothing can crush this human spirit of survival. However bleak the times maybe, hope will always prosper and make a renewed start. This is what constitutes Camus's "Absurdity of life". In absurdist philosophy, the absurd arises out of an individual's search for meaning in this meaningless world leading to disharmony. So, humans have three ways to solve this problem: suicide, religious refuge, and acceptance of absurdity. Camus endorsed the last option believing that only acceptance can give the greatest extent of one's freedom. Accepting the absurd and yearning to strive gives true meaning to life. Absurd means to fade and then flourish, despair and then elate, bleed and then soothe. Camus asserts that we should embrace this absurdity of life and take on the purpose of creating value and meaning in life. Effort and resilience and not suicide and despair are the appropriate responses in such formidable times. In *The Plague*, human happiness is undermined by the deadly epidemic yet the human spirit is the winner. We may enter into a zombie apocalypse, transcend into madness, lose humanity, but still, the human soul will never forget to live and move on.

According to Camus, "... if there is one thing one can always yearn for and sometimes attain, it is human love" (Camus 300). Camus believes that life is absurd and nothing is comprehensible but the only thing that one understands is human love. This love is the force that heals and brings in a world order by interdependence and compassion. In the novel, the characters of Dr. Rieux, Rambert and Tarrou struggle and work ceaselessly in spreading this compassion and finding meaning in healing others. They recognise the absurd but still work ceaselessly against it. Camus says, "...what we learn in times of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise" (Camus 308).

The meaning of life is portrayed through the character of Dr. Rieux who knows that people of the town would die of doing nothing at all so he chooses action in face of death. He realised that the only thing he learned from the epidemic was human love. So, however absurd our life may seem, the experience of human love brings meaning in an otherwise absurd life. After several months when the plague begins to wean away, the gates of the town are opened and Dr. Rieux listens to the cries of joy or euphoria rising from the town. This euphoria represents the victory of the human spirit. Camus, in a way, held that human life was absurd because we all live under the sentence of death, so, whether we die due to an epidemic or from some other cause doesn't matter. Sooner or later we all have to die and our attempt to resist death is futile. Camus believes that even if our life has no meaning, it is nobler to fight against death than simply to resign under its spell. Indeed, the epidemics draw out the best in people. The most important thing in life is life itself and the meaning we create out of it. Hence Camus derived a design in this inane life by believing that "One must imagine Sisyphus happy".

Even in times of the present Covid 19 pandemic, we have seen humanity triumph over selfish motives. Thus literature, whether in the past or present, reiterates this faith in humanity and love. Initially, the social fabric seems to have been destroyed but slowly man learns to sew the torn yarns of social togetherness. Every pandemic has and will continue to inspire

literature. Both pandemics and literature make people philosophical and inquisitive to unearth answers to their survival. Camus expounded that in the fight between pandemic and life all a man can learn is knowledge and memories: knowledge to learn from the mistakes and to move on and acknowledge memories of the appalling past to make an immaculate future. Thus, even in the present pandemic, the articulation of emotions through literature made the readers introspective and zealous enough to march ahead with rebooted euphoria to win over the dysphoria generated by the pestilence.

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