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Rereading Albert Camus' *The Plague* During a Pandemic: An African's Review

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The Plague is a philosophical reflection by Albert Camus written in the form of a novel. It was published in 1947 and so supposedly composed during the end of the Second World War. It is a short text consisting of five parts. My review is based on a reading of the first three parts. Part I of the book starts with the onset of the plague when the rats begin to die of unknown cause and ends with the proclamation of a shutdown. Part II is a description of the shutdown and its consequences manifested in the collective sense of loneliness, and fear that it engenders in each citizen. It ends with Rambert joining the community sanitary squad. Part III describes the anxiety of the inner city dwellers of a possible lockdown of their quarters. This causes riots and violent clashes with the authority. But at last the pandemic was finally under control and reducing its severity. But it had left a general feeling of collective despondency.

Up to that point the following are the major characters of the story, Dr. Bernard Rieux who is the main character in the novel; the narrator who is, presumably, Camus' mouthpiece; M. Michel, the concierge, and his wife Mme Michel; M. Othon the Police Magistrate; Raymond Rambert, journalist; Jean Tarrou, a visiting neighbour; Mercier, in charge of the Department of Sanitary Service tasked with the extermination of vermin; Fr. Paneloux, the priest; Joseph Grand, the clerk in the Municipal Office; M. Cottard, Grand's neighbor who attempted suicide; Richard, Rieux's colleague and the chairman of the local Medical Association; Castel, an older colleague of Rieux.

Several tracks of conversations and conflicts emerge in the course of the text. Of note in the first three parts are the disagreements of Dr. Rieux and Richard on the severity of the pestilence; the erudite Dr. Rieux and the naïve Joseph Grand; the conflict of points of view between Dr. Rieux and Raymond Rambert on the question of escape from the lockdown; Cottard and Tarrou on the question of forming a community action squad against the plague; the atheistic Rieux and the theistic Fr. Paneloux.

The setting of *The Plague* is Oran in Algeria, which happens to be the seat of a province in Algeria by the same name. The dating of this novel is around 1947 after World War II. Its theme therefore includes war as Camus draws parallels between the plague and war. As he remarks, "There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise".

But from an Africanist's perspective it was written in colonial times in a city which would later be the battleground and the site of the Oran Massacre of 1962, which led to the liberation of Algeria from the French. This sets the stage for one to interrogate the colonial undertones of the text. In this regard, Rambert coming to investigate and report on the living conditions in Arab quarters just at the outbreak of the plague becomes incidental rather than accidental. It would be a pretext to blame the Arabs, who were the colonized, for the outbreak of the pandemic. In fact the exclusion of the experiences of the colonized entirely by the narrator is indicative of the insignificance attached to them even in the trying moments of war and pestilence.

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Even though Dr Rieux is the main heroic character, his professional, dispassionate personality portrays him as disinterested and detached from the anxieties of the citizens. The one that towers to an African reader is the old Joseph Grand. His humility, kindness of heart, passion and commitment to his work, scorn at injustices, yearning for his wife who drifted away from him, strike a chord to the mind of an African reader more than does Dr Bernard Rieux. Camus describes Joseph Grand as having all the attributes of insignificance “after obtaining a matriculation certificate beyond which, for lack of money, he was unable to progress, he was given this temporary post, he had been led to expect, or so he said, speedy ‘confirmation’ in it”. It is this feeling of insignificance caused by the colonial experience that would capture the immediate attention of a keen African reader and his scorn of injustice as a coping mechanism towards this humiliating experience.

Another character that strikes a chord with an African reader readily is Mme Rieux, Dr. Benard's mother who steps in to take care of his household while his wife is away in another city at the sanatorium. Watching her son on the frontline, thereby exposing himself to the risk of infection, yet she remains calm and absolutely affectionate. She waits way into the night for him to come back. She glows with a smile anytime he comes back home. Her silence, patience, and care in the novel cast her as the representation of the solace that the exhausted Rieux needs at the end of daily routine.

The other character is Michel's wife at the last moments of her husband's life. Her desperate calls for help on Dr Rieux, who confesses his inability to help, are heart-wrenching. She exits the novel as soon as the husband passes away. But she permanently leaves the reader wondering what became of her fate. This leaves the reader continuously curious about the several scenarios that could play out in her life after Michel's demise. “Michel's death marked, one might say, the end of the first period...in which the perplexity of the early days gradually gave place to panic”. The exasperation in the eyes and sound of his wife creates an acute awareness of the desperation of grieving, widowed, single, unemployed women in Africa, facts which subject them to humiliation, exploitation, and send them further down into poverty. An aura of mystique constantly surrounds the old, and poor widow in Africa that on occasions has them accused of witchcraft and the occult.

Some themes that would catch the attention of an African reader are such as these: i) The poor protesting against going to hospital for fear of being used as experiments for the untested vaccines like the failing antisera of Dr Castel. “For most of them it would mean going to the hospital, and he knew how poor people felt about hospitals. ‘I don't want them trying their experiments on him’” said the wife of one of Dr. Rieux's patients; ii) the frigidity with which funerals are conducted during the pandemic; iii) the hint at the task of driving death-carts by Negroes which raises the question as to whether the term “negro” referred to blacks or to a special category of people; iv) unemployment due to the plague that has predisposed men to do the “rough work” in the hospitals that had initially been allocated to the prisoners, much to the chagrin of Tarrou.

The main weakness of the text for me is the absence of certain voices. Particularly, the colonized Algerians are completely absent; the women, on occasion when they were featured, were given peripheral roles as chambermaids; a mother just waiting for her son or exasperating at a dying child; a wife nursing her dying husband. Even in the case of the duty-bound Rieux, he

dispatches his chronically ill wife to another town, never to return. Featured prominently are the elite of the society such as Doctors, Priests, Journalists, the Bureaucrats, etc. Joseph Grand is the one left to speak on behalf of the downtrodden, while Cottard represents the underworld operatives.

But one positive thing about *The Plague* is the timeliness of reading it at this particular moment of COVID-19. It portrays the thought that pandemics are recurrent, thereby giving a sense of hope that just like the previous ones, this one is transient too. But much more commendable is Camus' clarity of expression. He gives a detailed description, analysis and evaluation of public health preparedness and response to pestilence. It is an indictment on the city of Oran's public health administration, which symbolically stands for any other city, county, and country with similar conditions. Sadly enough, most African nations fall into that category.

In the final analysis it helps a new reader to note that the novel is written in the general framework of a philosophical movement known as Existentialism, and Albert Camus was one of its foremost exponents. The existentialists focus their attention on the problem of life for a human being, particularly, life of a disoriented individual confronting a disoriented world. This is known as the problem of the human condition. The existentialists also share a common mindset that rejects the construction of all-encompassing systems of thought and challenge each individual to create meaning for oneself in order to reflect one's uniqueness.

In dealing with such questions, Camus has an overriding concept of the absurd. Besides, he was an atheist who was struggling with the problem of the foundations of values and morals in the absence of God. The absurd refers to the fact that as human beings, therefore rational, we are adept to set goals and meanings in life, yet we are immersed in a world that is drifting towards no goal at all. The characters echo this condition of absurdity. For example, Dr Rieux fights the plague while knowing that he has little chance of stopping it. Discerning how each character demonstrates this is an exciting motif for the reader.

Of particular note in this regard, is the narrator whose identity is concealed, at least for the first three parts. He is interposed between animated conversations of the characters to engage in soliloquies that ponder the existential condition caused by the plague in the town of Oran. The constant thought running through his reflections is the inescapable fact that our destinies are ultimately tied together. There is no distinction of class, race, education, or any other form of privilege; just like under pestilence, no one is safe.

Camus takes an issue with humanism, the belief in the supremacy of the human race over all else in the universe, which caused the Oranians to drop their guard against the plague. He narrates that "Forty thousand rats died of plague before the disease spread to the inhabitants". This goes further in showing that the human condition and destiny is inextricably tied to that of the rest of the world, all in equal measure.

For a better appreciation and understanding of *The Plague*, I recommend that the reader casts a look at other texts by Camus such as *The Myth of Sisyphus*, as well as works of other writers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Franz Kafka, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre.