

## Relevance of Camus' *The Plague* in Covid-19 Crisis

**Jheel D. Barad**

Training officer at IITE, Gandhinagar

**ORCID:** <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2654-6644>

### **Abstract:**

This paper delves into a comparative examination of the novel *The Plague* by Albert Camus in light of the Covid-19 crisis. Through a careful analysis, this paper aims to highlight the uncanny parallels between the fictional world depicted in *The Plague* and the real-life circumstances surrounding the global pandemic. The paper explores the shared situations, predicaments faced by characters, and the pivotal choices they must make within the constraints of their respective crises, drawing attention to the surprising similarities with our current time. By presenting compelling arguments, this study seeks to underscore the relevance of the themes and similarities found in *The Plague* as they relate to the unprecedented challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, corona virus, The Plague, Albert Camus, La Peste

### **Introduction to Camus' *The Plague***

*The Plague (La Peste)*, published in 1947 by Albert Camus, is a novel set in the fictional city of Oran during a bubonic plague outbreak. The unnamed narrator, who reveals their identity only in the last chapter, aims to provide an objective documentation of the epidemic's impact on the city and its inhabitants. Camus, drawing parallels to the German occupation of France in World War II, uses the narrator to explore the complexities of documenting a personally



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

[www.vidhyayanaejournal.org](http://www.vidhyayanaejournal.org)

Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

and professionally significant experience. The narrator employs three types of data—participant observations, eyewitness accounts, and written documents—to convey the various ways the epidemic affected the city and its residents, echoing the methods commonly used by qualitative researchers (Camus).

### **Methodology:**

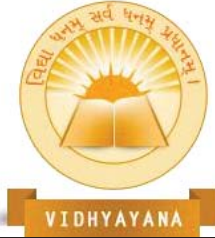
This research employs a comparative analysis approach, juxtaposing key elements from *The Plague* with contemporary reports, narratives, and public discourse related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim is to identify parallels in themes, character dilemmas, and societal responses.

The interconnectedness of literature and reality has long been a subject of scholarly discourse. As Susan Sontag aptly notes, "Literature is a primary source for the comprehension of human experience." In the context of this research, the parallels drawn between 'The Plague' and the Covid-19 crisis underscore literature's unique ability to illuminate and foreshadow societal patterns, urging us to heed its lessons (Sontag).

### **Arguments**

This literary research article examines the parallels between the fictional world of Albert Camus' *The Plague* and the contemporary Covid-19 crisis, shedding light on the recurrent theme of human reluctance to learn from historical lessons embedded in literature. Drawing from Aristotle's assertion that 'The truth of literature is deeper and far real than the facts of history and truth of philosophy' (Aristotle), this study explores the deeper, more resonant truths embedded in literary narratives.

The protagonist of *The Plague*, Dr. Bernard Rieux, serves as a poignant parallel to Dr. Li Wenliang in Wuhan, both attempting to alert their respective governments about emerging health crises. As literary foreboding met the reality of the internet age, the echoes of ignored warnings resound. This phenomenon reflects the perpetual human tendency to dismiss literature as mere fiction, overlooking its prophetic potential.



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

[www.vidhyayanaejournal.org](http://www.vidhyayanaejournal.org)

Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

The reluctance of the government in *The Plague* to acknowledge the epidemic and its economic concerns mirrors the contemporary response in Wuhan, where Dr. Li Wenliang faced accusations of spreading fake news. This critical parallel underscores the societal inclination to prioritize economic interests over public health, echoing the sentiments of Camus' Oran.

In both instances, the governments' delayed responses, in *The Plague* and the Covid-19 crisis reveal a striking similarity in prioritizing economic considerations over immediate action to safeguard public health. This study delves into the consequences of such choices, emphasizing the recurring theme that economics often takes precedence over human lives.

### **Fake Beliefs**

As humanity grapples with pandemics, it is intriguing to observe the recurrence of false beliefs that transcend time and context. Albert Camus' *The Plague* and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic draw striking parallels, not only in the shared experience of a global health crisis but also in the persistence of certain misconceptions. The eerie similarity between the fictional world of *The Plague* and our contemporary reality, shedding light on the recurring patterns of misguided beliefs.

One recurring theme is the unfounded optimism tied to temperature changes. In both eras, there is a collective yearning for relief with shifting weather patterns. While many believe that an increase in temperature will rid us of the virus, mirroring the false hope expressed by the residents of Oran in *The Plague*, it is essential to recognize the scientific fallacy behind such assumptions. The World Health Organization (WHO) unequivocally states that the COVID-19 virus can be transmitted in all areas, regardless of climate. The people of that time had same fake belief to today's time of change in situation would come with change in atmosphere. We feel virus to disappear with increase in temperature, while in America people feel it will disappear with decrease in temperature. (Gray)



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

[www.vidhyanaejournal.org](http://www.vidhyanaejournal.org)

Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

In times of crisis, the human instinct to seek solace in religion becomes palpable. Drawing a parallel with Father Paneloux's sermons in *The Plague*, we witness contemporary religious leaders offering interpretations that link the pandemic to divine retribution. An instance of this can be found in the statement made by the head of Jamat in an 'Al-Hazira' report, where he attributes He also said that 'If gathering in mosque (masjid) is infectious than this notion is worst. This echoes Father Paneloux's assertion that the plague is a punishment for sins. (Gupta).

In *The Plague*, characters grapple with societal restrictions, mirroring real-world scenarios where some argue against restrictions imposed by authorities. India is facing criticism for allowing a massive Hindu festival to go ahead despite the spiralling COVID-19 crisis. Close to 170,000 new cases have been reported, yet another record high. India has now overtaken Brazil as the second worst-hit country by the pandemic (Arroyo). The World Health Organization (WHO) conducted a risk assessment of the COVID-19 situation in India, identifying several factors contributing to the resurgence and acceleration of transmission. These included an increased proportion of cases with potentially more transmissible variants, large religious and political gatherings that heightened social mixing, and a lack of adherence to public health and social measures. Despite prior warnings about the possibility of a second wave, political parties persisted in organizing rallies, with even the prime minister addressing large crowds, posing a known risk during a pandemic. Additionally, the Maha Kumbh Mela in Haridwar was allowed to proceed, disregarding clear risks associated with the event, and COVID-19 protocols were openly flouted. This collective failure to mitigate risks and implement preventive measures exacerbated the spread of the virus (The Wire Staff).

### Challenges

In times of crisis, the human experience is marked by the emergence of unique challenges that shape the collective response to existential threats. Albert Camus' *The Plague* and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic serve as poignant reminders of the shared struggles that transcend temporal and geographical boundaries. The two recurrent challenges — the burial



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

[www.vidhyayanaejournal.org](http://www.vidhyayanaejournal.org)

Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

of the dead and the rise of hoarding — drawing parallels between the fictional realm of *The Plague* and the stark realities of our contemporary world.

The imagery of mass burials, evoking a haunting sense of loss and communal grief, finds resonance in both *The Plague* and the COVID-19 era. Two small graveyards in Juhapura, Ahmedabad, face challenges of space constraints, causing substantial waiting times for burials, up to six hours. Shortages of grave diggers further exacerbate delays, prompting volunteers and laborers to work until 3 am to meet demand. To address the situation during the first wave of COVID-19, a private piece of land named Namara Chhota Kabrastan was donated for burials, featuring graves dug as deep as 10 feet (Shah).

In *The Plague*, the fear of contagion led people to don raincoats as a futile safeguard against the insidious plague. However, this gave rise to opportunistic hoarders, who exploited the panic by engaging in black-market activities, inflating prices of essential items, including raincoats. Drawing a parallel to the contemporary situation, while raincoat hoarding may not be our concern, the pandemic has witnessed a surge in hoarding behavior. Studies have shown that COVID-19 has increased people's anxiety, depression, insomnia, hoarding and other behaviors and has even aggravated these characteristics into mental diseases, thereby seriously harming people's physical and mental health (McCown et al.)

Arundhati Roy's poignant narrative unveils the tragic consequences of 'social distancing' in a world marred by apartheid and compression. The lockdown, ostensibly enforcing physical separation, paradoxically results in an unthinkable scale of physical compression, as the impoverished are sealed into cramped slums, and cities expel their working-class citizens. Roy vividly captures the almost Biblical 'exodus' of a 'surplus humanity,' forced to embark on a long, perilous march home. This mass migration, akin to the flight of old birds, poses existential questions, leaving an indelible mark on the collective conscience (Kabel and Phillipson). 'where do old birds go to die?', Anjum – the main character in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, an outcast *hijra* who lives in a graveyard – asked the Imam Sahib, 'Do they fall on us like stones from the sky? Do we stumble on their bodies in the streets?' (Roy) Like the 'unconsoled', if they are honoured, they turn up as a heap of statistics. In the parallel



to the 'unconsoled,' these individuals risk being reduced to mere statistics, underscoring the tragic toll of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Solutions

In times of pandemic, literature often becomes a mirror reflecting both the despair and resilience of humanity. Albert Camus' *The Plague* provides not only a narrative of suffering but also unveils subtle solutions that resonate across time, finding relevance in the ongoing battle against COVID-19. This article explores the solutions presented in *The Plague* and contemplates their applicability in our contemporary, industrialized world.

A recurring theme in *The Plague* was the imposition of quarantine measures to curb the spread of the epidemic. This echoes in the COVID-19 era, where quarantine remains a cornerstone in managing the contagion. The importance of isolating infected individuals and restricting movement is underlined by scholars and health organizations globally. According to a study published in *The Lancet*, early and strict quarantine measures have proven effective in controlling the transmission of infectious diseases, emphasizing the relevance of historical solutions in the face of contemporary challenges (Jain et al.).

*The Plague* illuminates the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. The novel portrays an increased awareness of cleanliness and a surge in volunteerism to aid the needy. In parallel, the COVID-19 era has witnessed a global mobilization of volunteers, community organizations, and individuals towards helping those affected. Research published in the *Journal of Social Policy and Society* indicates that community-driven initiatives play a crucial role in mitigating the impact of pandemics, reinforcing the idea that collective efforts are pivotal in times of crisis.

While *The Plague* depicted the eventual end of the epidemic after approximately 10 months, the timeline for the conclusion of the COVID-19 pandemic remains uncertain. In our contemporary era characterized by industrialization and globalization, the complexity of the situation prompts speculation on the duration of the ongoing crisis. The emergence of



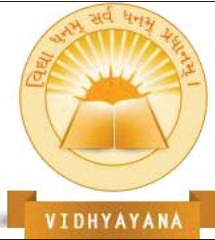
technological solutions and rapid vaccine development, as seen in COVID-19, may expedite the resolution compared to historical pandemics.

Even as there have been anticipated the end of the COVID-19 era, the novel habits cultivated during the pandemic may endure. Just as *The Plague* left an indelible mark on its survivors, the practices of hand cleaning and mask-wearing may become intrinsic to our daily lives. Scholarly studies, such as those published in Nature Reviews Immunology, emphasize the role of personal hygiene and face masks in preventing respiratory infections, suggesting that these practices could persist in the post-pandemic world.

Looking ahead, societal changes inspired by *The Plague* may offer insights into potential adaptations in the COVID-19 aftermath. Imagining a future where gathering in public becomes regulated, malls transform into hospitals, and online education becomes the norm raises thought-provoking questions. While these speculations may seem extreme, they prompt us to consider the profound impact of pandemics on societal structures and norms.

## Conclusions

In the contemplation of the parallels between Albert Camus' *The Plague* and the ongoing COVID-19 era, it becomes increasingly apparent that humanity's response to crises remains remarkably consistent across time. The recurring themes of false beliefs, resistance to directives, and the profound psychological impact portrayed in *The Plague* echo in our contemporary struggles. German philosopher Georg Hegel famously said, "The only thing that we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history" (Sanghi). The challenges of mass burials and hoarding vividly depicted in both literature and reality serve as stark reminders of the perennial nature of human responses to pandemics. However, amid the gloom, there is a glimmer of hope found in the solutions embedded in Camus' work and the adaptability exhibited in the face of adversity, the first thrill of hope had been enough to shatter what fear and hopelessness had failed to impair. The lessons gleaned from literature, coupled with contemporary insights, offer a guide for navigating the complexities of the COVID-19 era.



## Works Cited

Aristotle. *Poetics*. MAPLE PRESS PVT Limited, 2020.

Arroyo, Martin. "COVID-19: India faces criticism for allowing massive religious festival to go ahead.", - *YouTube*, 22 September 2021, <https://youtu.be/y5dB1xs3nQw?si=iKpYUqAd-smUKOX7>. Accessed 7 January 2024.

Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. Penguin, 2010.

Gray, Richard. "Will warm weather stop Covid-19 from spreading?" *BBC*, 23 March 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200323-coronavirus-will-hot-weather-kill-covid-19>. Accessed 7 January 2024.

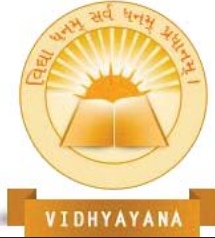
Gupta, Mohak. "It's time to stay in mosques, Allah will save us: Tablighi Jamaat chief told followers in leaked audio." *India Today*, 1 April 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/it-s-time-to-stay-in-mosques-allah-will-save-us-tablighi-jamaat-chief-told-followers-in-leaked-audio-1662297-2020-04-01>. Accessed 7 January 2024.

Jain, Nityanand, et al. "The global response: How cities and provinces around the globe tackled Covid-19 outbreaks in 2021." *The Lancet*, 7 March 2021, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lansea/article/PIIS2772-3682\(22\)00036-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lansea/article/PIIS2772-3682(22)00036-1/fulltext). Accessed 7 January 2024.

Kabel, Ahmed, and Robert Phillipson. "Structural violence and hope in catastrophic times: from Camus' *The Plague* to Covid-19." *Sage publications*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2020, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0306396820974180#body-ref-bibr56-0306396820974180>.

McCown, William, et al. "Association between fear of COVID-19 and hoarding behavior during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic: The mediating role of mental health status." *Frontiers*, 21 September 2022, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.996486/full>. Accessed 7 January 2024.





Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

[www.vidhyanaejournal.org](http://www.vidhyanaejournal.org)

Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

Roy, Arundhati. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Penguin books., 2017.

Sanghi, Ashwin. "What we learn from history is that we do not." *The Times of India*, 25 March 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/chanakyas-chant/what-we-learn-from-history-is-that-we-do-not/>. Accessed 7 January 2024.

Shah, Jumana. "Ahmedabad: Space Becomes an Issue for Those Who Bury Their Dead as COVID-19 Rages." *The Wire*, 7 May 2021, <https://thewire.in/health/ahmedabad-space-becomes-an-issue-for-religions-that-bury-their-dead-as-covid-19-rages>. Accessed 7 January 2024.

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Penguin Books, 2009.

The Wire Staff. "Religious, Political Mass Gatherings Contributed to COVID-19 Resurgence in India: WHO." *The Wire*, 13 May 2021, <https://thewire.in/health/religious-political-mass-gatherings-contributed-to-covid-19-resurgence-in-india-who>. Accessed 7 January 2024.