Existential Crisis In Pandemic Literature: An Exploration of the Plague by Albert Camus

Gladys Rupavathi. B and S. Mahadevan

Department of English and Foreign Languages, SRM Institute of Science and Technology

ABSTRACT

Literature juxtaposes the impact and the consequences of historical or fictional incidents with reference to certain literary movements. We cannot deny the truth that life of human beings is filled with innumerable, inevitable, jeopardous calamities and epidemics from time immemorial. History has explored civilization, death and disasters in various eras of human existence. One among them is the devastating epidemic or pandemic which has ventured from the prehistoric era to the present scenario of the modern world. Repetition of Pandemic concept can be revealed in literary discourse which can be traced from the Great Pestilence of Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales and in the 20th century literature, The Plague by Albert Camus can be considered as the best illustration of pandemics. Existential way of survival is manifested from the human essence and his response to such inevitable circumstances. The purpose of this paper is to analyze and explore the insights of the existential crisis such as anxiety, bad faith and authenticity and its reflection as well as the illustration from the pandemic novel.

KEY WORDS: EXISTENTIALISM, EXISTENTIAL CRISIS, PANDEMIC LITERATURE, ANXIETY, BAD FAITH.

INTRODUCTION

"The unexamined life is not worth living."-Socrates The moment when an individual examines the meaning of his life and gets affected by its contemplation encounters the dread called Existential crisis. Major loss and death induces existential crisis in an individual. In the pandemic times, the case is quite serious, as the existential dread becomes a cause of throng but not of an individual alone. During this existential crisis, an individual tries to decide on his own, his actions or to cease those actions. He opts for freedom while enduring existential crises in his life. On the whole anxiety becomes one of the major outputs of existential crisis. This in a broader sense can be called Existential Angst. The turning point in life leads to such angst. This quality of angst moves towards abstract features of emotions, such as alienation and insignificance of existence in the society. The concept of pandemic or epidemic is often collaborated in literature especially in the modern times. Titles related to the

pandemics are found not alone in the scientific genre but also can be found and analyzed in philosophical aspects such as in existentialism. Albert Camus, an atheist philosopher denies the concept that the meaning or purpose is predestined, but considers that the decision and the plan are done by an individual out of his own will.

Exploration Of Existential Crisis: Camus in his pandemic novel The Plague has juxtaposed the jeopardous condition of the city called Oran in Algeria, which is affected by a plague. It is identified by them after several days. The travel of the plague leads to the existential crisis, as people start experiencing heavy loss of lives, shortage of food and dominance of police. Dr.Rieux, a loyal physician to dwindle the effect of the plague, strives to the extreme. The colleague of Dr. Rieux is Jean Tarrou who is well-defined but an inexplicable character, tries to reason out with humanity and convince Rambert, a journalist, not to flee to Paris. Paneleoux, the priest in the spiritual aspect claims the plague to be the pestilence sent by supernatural entities, and all the sufferings are only due to the anger of God.

Bad Faith And The Freedom In Existence: Deceiving oneself is the best definition of the existential phenomenon 'bad faith'. Jean Paul Sartre claims that human beings do not exist in an exact manner in which they are ought to live. (Thomson) It is because our worldly thoughts impact our

Biosc Biotech Res Comm P-ISSN: 0974-6455 E-ISSN: 2321-4007

Identifiers and Pagination

Year: 2021 Vol: 14 No (8) Special Issue

Pages: 150-153

This is an open access article under Creative

Commons License Attribn 4.0 Intl (CC-BY).

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21786/bbrc/14.8.34>

Article Information

Received: 04th June 2021

Accepted after revision: 19th July 2021

consciousness of freedom and makes us think about responsibility. Paneloux, the priest, denies thinking logically and refuses to go to hospital when he falls sick. This represents bad faith because he acts to encourage one particular set of emotions or feelings as if impressed by another. We can willingly accept that bad faith means to lie oneself, in the situation that we can differentiate the lie to one from lying in common (Cox 58).

Camus describes the city of Oran and he points out the features and qualities that lack in Oran. He tries to reveal the individual's connection with the environment. A modern town according to Camus is a mystical prototype of death, alienation and exile. Most of his novels have dealt with the concept of death especially in *The Plague*. The Plague manifests the bitter reality that it has no figurative similarity for the indignity inflicted upon humans by humans. Camus has invented the diabolic nature of man who emulates the torments of life and who accepts the monstrous pandemic and tries to escape fear by taking refuge in calamity. Protagonists of *The Plague* remain to the feel of insecurity which makes them to have unity among them (Picon 153).

Freewill And The Fear Of Death: Human beings regain balance of themselves in the troublesome struggle with death. The freewill in him germinates to start a fresh life. Dr. Grand vows to start a new life after the epidemic and he struggles with the illness. The free will can be revealed in the character Grand and finally he succeeds. Anguish is the state that arises before fear. It is awareness that we have choice. In a simple way, fear of being feared is what we call Anguish. Bad faith plays as a remedy for anguish. It paves the way to escape fear. The person who struggles with death for him all sufferings ends up in futility. Similarly, efforts taken during pandemic seem to be futile but it leads to progress of the recovery.

Camus has put the optimistic aspects in his novel *The Plague* in order to overcome during hopeless times. People use their free will, the options to choose lies in front of them whether to face death or to struggle against death. Tarrou is an atheist, so he neither believes in divine entity nor in illusion or intuition. He does not find any concept of meaning or purpose in human existence. He uses logical and ethical aspects in order to overcome the epidemic situation. Tarrou neither follows any norms nor does he fall as a victim for bad faith. He has no anxiousness, fear of death or any sorrowful emotions of being isolated from his land. Though he is a stranger to Oran, he himself is an outsider to the worldly norms and bad faith. He does not fall as a prey to anxiousness, he boldly faces death. Joseph Grand, an aged man in Oran feels alienated after his wife leaves him.

Absurdity And Meaning In Existence: Boredom is another aspect in existential crisis that can be seen in the character, Grand. He does not know how to add color to his life, his lack of interest and creating purpose or meaning enrages his wife, who leaves him, creating meaning and following the pre destined meaning creates anxiety in one point of time. Grand faces this anxiety

due to his predestined meaning whereas his wife creates her own meaning and tries to escape anxiousness by using her free-will. Grand's anxiety becomes a hinder stone for his literary career. Cottard, being a wanted accused, lives with anxiety and with constant fear of being arrested and punished. He has 'bad faith' which deceives him from being happy during quarantine only because of his smuggling. Dr. Richard has the bad faith as he deceives him by denying the fact that an unusual disease is the bubonic plague.

He procrastinates by warning the public. His bad faith leads to the loss of several lives. People in Oran feel nostalgic of the freedom they enjoyed. The restrictions proposed by the government affect them emotionally. Their routines change and their lives become more troublesome. Individual gets agitated if his routines do not change, like the myth of Sisyphus and also if sudden changes occur and disturb their mechanical life, they start rebelling. Sisyphus rebels for the non changing action of futile. The huge rock he rolls above with effort rolls down to the former position. Sisyphus does not create any anchor to stop the rock from rolling. Individuals who believe and create meaning make such an anchor with great effort in order to stop the troublesome situation to come back to the former state. The rock of Sisyphus was rolled by his absurd action. Similarly in Oran, everyone started bothering about their personal struggles selfishly. Each person considered the stress to be unique. They have the bad faith as they deceive themselves that this struggle is not a unified fight against pandemic. They do not have the tendency to share their sufferings to anyone. The Plague conveys a communal reaction to a common problem. At present it is the whole city experiencing the absurd, and the alienation of every individual is a minute symptom of the quarantine inflicted on the city completely (Sonnenfeld 107).

Anguish And Anxiety Of A Being: Many critics proposed that unclassifiable entity of Oran city is the real protagonist of the novel *The Plague*. It is a kind of confession as professed by Dr. Rieux. He faces absurd as Sisyphus but do not rebel against the supernatural entity, but rebels against father Paneloux for the cause of M. Othan's youngest son's death is not due to God's anger as he preached, because the small boy was innocent. Paneloux justifies his statement as the inevitable death of several innocent, make Christians in a dilemmatic state whether to believe on everything or not to believe on anything. Similarly as the rolling rock of Sisyphus, the microbe bacillus plays as a troublesome burden which may roll back anytime after reaching the height of success and peace. Though people know this fact, they with their bad faith avoid their anguish and anxiety of the uninvited pandemic again. Tarrou says that no one wastes time when one is conscious of time. Tarrou philosophically as existentialist points out that one can bring the time's awareness by involving in frustrating and mechanical routines. Whiling away time on being frustrated is not beneficial in anyway. The true meaning of time conscious is to bring any profitable outcome out of the time availed to us.

Camus in 'The Plague', conveys that the people in a plague prone zone, quarantines the whole city being aggressive to the past, agitated by the present, and tries to escape the future. We are almost like those whose justice, or hatred, is enforced to live behind prison bars. The notion of imprisonment as working time is clearly existential. And Sartre, in an intuitional analysis of sensitive consciousness, expresses of someone literally hopping out of joy as a way of using their bodily transformation to entreat up, as if by wizardly, the possibility of possessing a favorable situation 'all at a time' excluding the time for its need, temporal unfolding (Flynn 6). Michel Foucault claims that 'Time has its own viscosity' Ecstatic Temporality embodies its flow (Flynn 6).

Though Cottard and Grand are neighbors, they do not know each other. Cottard's suicide attempt brought them close. Grand is an introvert and does not deal with others' sufferings. This shows his imbalanced nature of handling time. He wastes his time by focusing on one particular aspect alone that is his literary career. He is not successful in his personal life. Cottard tries to confess his crime to Grand but time did not pave the way for their communication. His fear and anxiety stopped him from feeling free. He feels the complete isolation. Similarly, Grand feels alienated because he neither allows Cottard to talk to him nor he himself talks to Cottard. Both of them feel existential alienation, which is one of the existential crises.

Absurdity And Alienation: Dr. Rieux scrutinizes Tarrou's philosophy of human existence and analyses to whom the plague attacks. According to Rieux, Joseph Grand is an innocent and harmless character, and he couldn't accept that such an innocent man can ever fall as a prey to the plague epidemic. None could ever draw meaning for the deadly epidemic. It is an absurd rock of Sisyphus. It falls on anyone, good or bad, moral or immoral, perfect or imperfect. Epidemic is impartial in choosing its victim. Father Paneloux considers death to be an inevitable part of life that everyone must rebel against. An asthma patient of Dr. Rieux chooses to locate time by counting peas in a balanced speed as *The Last Leaf* by O. Henry. This reflects Tarrou's philosophical concept of avoiding the waste of time. He believes that heavy routines make one overcome the frustration. Asthma patient's deeds of wasting time are absurd and meaningless.

Similarly Grand tries to write a manuscript without any flow. Such thought too is absurd and meaningless. Grand chooses and appreciates idealness, he did not stick on to that action alone but he tries his level best to help struggle against the deadly epidemic. Camus's tragic concept matches the situation of America. Sartre argues that the novel totally comprises the struggle against divine source or heaven for representing "ideal" circumstances of captured France's revolt against Nazism. He has blended humanity and evil together. Such activity becomes a betrayal of the real situation or condition of human's struggle to attain victory. American

context with natural set is revealed in his allegorical novel *The Plague*.

It is an ailing component in Camus that is awfully felt in *The Plague*; the audacity which rises up to ultimate height and inexplicable failure, love for humans as they are, and a certain faith in human, in spite of several drawbacks which are never considered as a moral faults (Dobrovsky 19). Camus wrote the novel during the war and he published it in 1947 as the first French novel as soon as the war came to an end. It is sensible to represent confinement by another, as it constitutes anything that truly exists in such a way that which does not exist... This is the quote that Camus initially prefaces from Defoe's quotation which manifests the allegorical sense with the blend of historical aspects and social complexities. Camus manifests the alienation in individuals that is very much profound that one could accept the cause and consequences of existential crisis, as Dr. Rieux. The novel is an embodiment of death and alienation. The quarantine camp allegorically represents concentration camp of Nazi. Initially the people of the Oran can be seen as a neutral and after the plague they feel victimized. The alienation brings the awareness of the plague. Plague itself is an allegorical representation of German troops in France. The hegemonic power system is juxtaposed in *The Plague*.

For Rieux the implications are conceptual and literary, still the text has done its influence on the reader by the abundance of terrifying gleaming images. By using the plague as a tool, Oran takes its position amidst these demonic cities (Finel-Honigman 79). In *The Plague*, the diversity of the inner sense along with the unity of a structure brings slight disappointment. To move in one direction alone, but to the edge of the limit or to take back into control the tendency of opposition (Picon 152). The expressive tools of *The Plague* are of an effective complexity. Camus' way of solving intricate problems by complicated means, that might seem at first appearance, invariably as right. What finally comes out is that, if Rieux has written a chronicle, Camus has written a novel; that *The Plague* is not an existential path in literary outfit, but a victorious artifice (Moses 428).

The characters in the allegorical novel *The Plague* reveals the several existential crises. The plague as a rolling rock of Sisyphus and as a representation of German troops dominates with huge power and grabs the mechanical easy going life of people. Existential crises are inevitable and anxiety occurs for certain, especially during the problematic situations like pandemic. Human emotions ebb and flow like waves according to the reverberation and disturbance in routine. There are several ways to tackle such situations. Bad faith or self deception can be used in a positive way and for a positive purpose, to overcome anxiety. Due to some reason like epidemic situations or war complications, alienation is dealt with in mass. It becomes an existential crisis, not alone for an individual but for the community as a whole. The best method to overcome the alienation is to communicate

with others, the problems or any situation that one could not face alone.

CONCLUSION

In the novel *The Plague*, the metamorphosis of the human emotions from meaningless to meaningful that is absurd to logical, rebelling Sisyphus to accustomed individuals by the awareness of the inevitability of catastrophe can be seen. Dr. Rieux accepted the fate after rebelling and investigating plague and the quality of humanity. Tarrou turned into the pre eminent ethical preacher from an outsider who came just to observe Oran. Some characters in the novel try to escape whereas some try their level best to fight against the epidemic with zeal. Dr. Rieux succeeds, but his sick wife dies before their reunion. Father Paneloux turns from a traditional and structuralist Jesuit priest to a postmodern doubtful investigator of the existence with reference to divinity. Thus, existential crises are inescapable from human life. Each individual has to cross this phase in one way or the other during their lifespan.

Individuals' trials and tribulations are dealt with existential crises and thus lead to the transformation from an absurd rock to a meaningful sculpture. Therefore, existential crises pave way for the metamorphosis of human beings and their existence. Individuals become free to choose in life and try to comprehend the meaning of life logically and with probability. Existential crisis brings maturity and the awareness of existence and acts according to the meaning either with the belief that everything is predestined by God, or with the belief that is destined but to create one's own destination. According to Sartre's concept of existence precedes essence. Dr. Rieux's action and his manifestation of existence reveal his essence. Similarly, Tarrou and Paneloux expressed their free will in their existence and finally their essence proved who they exactly are. Though everything seemed to have come back to normal after the plague, the anxiety of Dr. Rieux as a physician, about the bacillus microbe and its effect remains in him.

REFERENCES

- Albert Sonnenfeld, (1961) Albert Camus as Dramatist: The Sources of His Failure, in *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol.5, No.4, June,,pp.106-23
- Gulbis, Emily. Camus' (2020) *The Plague*; Humanity in the face of Existential Threat, Redbrick, 29 April.

- Cox, Gary. (2009) *How to Be an Existentialist*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Flynn, Thomas R. (2006) *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*. US: Oxford UP.
- Gaetan Picon, (1957) *Exile and the kingdom*, translated by Josephine Valenza, in *Mercure de France* (reprinted by permission of the author and *Mercure de France*), May, (and reprinted in *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays* edited by Germaine Bree, Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1962, pp. 152-56).
- Jacobs, Ethan '12, (2012) *Is The Plague an Existential Novel*, Spring Semester. Paper1. digitalcommons.imsa.edu/spring2012/1
- Lombardi, Esther. *Memorable Quotes from The Plague'* by Camus. Thought Co, Feb. 16, 2021. thoughtco.com/the-plague-quotes-738216.
- Michael A. Peters. *The Plague: Human resilience and the collective response to catastrophe*, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 2020. DOI: 10.1080/00131857.2020.1745921
- Plato. *Apology* 38a.(1966) *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 1 translated by Harold North Fowler; Introduction by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1980) *Albert Camus 1913-1960*. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Michigan: Gale Research Company.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. (2003) *Being and Nothingness*. US: Routledge.
- Serge Doubrovsky, (1961) *Camus et l' Amérique*, in *Nouvelle Revue Française* (reprinted by permission of the author and *Nouvelle Revue Française*), February, (translated by Ellen Corroy Kennedy and reprinted as *Camus in America* in *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays* edited by Germaine Bree, Prentice-Hall, inc, 1962, pp.16-19)
- Socrates Plato 'Apology' 38a
- Thomson, Iain, (2019) *Heidegger's Aesthetics*, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/.
- Wagner, Stephen I. (2020) *Rereading Albert Camus' The Plague during a Pandemic: of Plagues and Nazis: Camus' Journey from Moral Nihilism*, *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 4: Iss.2,,pp.103-106.digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol4/iss2/10