

LA PESTE (THE PLAGUE)

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Title: La Peste (The Plague)

Author: Albert Camus (Translated into English by Stuart Gilbert)

Publisher: Penguin Books

Pages: 296

Long before Psychology and Psychiatry became scientific disciplines and attempted to make systematic forays into the mysteries of human nature, literature and philosophy had been grappling with the mind and happenings inside the mind. It may be of use to revisit the contributions made towards unveiling human nature by novelists and philosophers as these often offer astute observations on the same. It is in this context that Albert Camus' novel *La Peste* (The Plague — translated into English by Stuart Gilbert, published in 1947 — ISBN 978-0-141-04923-6) becomes relevant.¹ Camus was one of the leading French philosophers of his time and the proponent of the concept of the 'Absurd' — that life intrinsically does not have any meaning. He became the second youngest recipient of the Nobel Prize of Literature at 43 years and died in a car accident at 46 years of age.

The novel belongs to the philosophical novel genre though it can be regarded, in all respects, as an "open classic". Openness indicates the capacity of the work to remain flexible to multiple simultaneous interpretations while the classic nature of the work is evident by its relevance across the times and spaces that man has inhabited. The novel deals with an epidemic of Plague striking the village of Oran in Algeria and the response of the town, including the

medical community and volunteer activists, towards resisting it. It is in the form of a narrative or chronicle by Dr Bernard Rieux, who is one of the doctors of Oran in charge of treating the afflicted people. Though the central narrative is certainly about the Plague epidemic, the novel tries to widen its scope to 'pestilences' in general, both natural and man-made and to consequent human suffering and resistance — *"Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in this world; yet we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on us from a blue sky."*

'The Plague' was reviewed by The British Medical Journal in 2007 in the section of Medical Classics.² Another of Camus' works titled 'The Myth of Sisyphus' has been revisited and reflected upon in an article titled 'Camus and Modern Psychiatry: The Myth of Sisyphus – Reflection' in the January 2017 edition of British Journal of Psychiatry.³ 'The Plague' has something to offer for the general reader, the health professional and the mental health professional. For the general reader, it lays out in the open the recurring monotones of human suffering at the outset of unexpected catastrophes. For the medical professional, the following excerpt shall be more than sufficient:

...that Dr Rieux resolved to compile this chronicle, so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace, but should bear witness in favour of those plague stricken people, so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure, and to state quite simply what we learn in a time of pestilence, that there are more things to admire in men than to despise.

Please cite this article as: John MR. La Peste (The Plague). Kerala Journal of Psychiatry 2017; 30(1):50-1.

None the less, he knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could only be the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never-ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers.

For the mental health professional, it exemplifies how we should continue our resistance against and services towards illnesses that are devastating and have no ready or complete cure like severe schizophrenia, treatment resistant depression, mental retardation, etc. The treatment of Severe Mental Illness has not progressed significantly in the last century and we are still struggling to control, not to mention cure, these illnesses with a very limited armamentarium. The onus is to continue the fight, though we may not be perfect, though we may be battling our own personal afflictions, though we may hardly seem saintly.

The novel has been criticized for using a natural disaster like the Plague for alluding to man-made disasters like fascism and also for using an ‘antihistorical’ ethic.⁴ It frequently appears repetitive and monotonous, though part of it might have been an intentional ploy for explaining the

repetitive nature of the epidemic as is evident in the following excerpt — ‘*you haven’t understood that it (the plague) means exactly that –the same thing over and over and over again.*’

However, for its full faced confrontation with catastrophe, for its deliberate downplay of the ‘hero’ and realistic portrayal of men and their fates, for its relatively mature and empathetic attitude towards human suffering, Camus’ *La Peste* shall be remembered.

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Source of support: None

Conflict of interest: None declared

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First submitted: 6th January 2017

Published online: 7th January 2017