CHAPTER III
FIGHTING A FORMIDABLE FOE

Man suffers basically from the desire to prove his strength. There is a constant power struggle within him seeking to assert his supremacy over others. The violence and terror that he resorts to, is a manifestation of this need to reassert and reassure himself of the power he wields. The epidemic of the plague which breaks out in Oran is the symbol of a historical reality but it could also be reflective of the thousand ills that plague mankind. The Plague is an example of how human beings can unite to fight the inhuman enemy. Despite being aware that human beings live in a world of absurdity and cannot escape its inevitable end, death, Camus feels that man must find meaning in his existence by confronting the absurd even if it means fighting the formidable foe.

Camus’ The Plague draws its inspiration from Daniel Defoe’s Journal of the Plague Year (1722). Defoe’s novel, published fifty seven years after the Great Plague of London in 1665, not only chronicles the chaos of daily life under the onslaught of the plague which had left about twenty percent of the population dead but also suggests precautions to be taken in such a crisis. Chronicling a society ridden by a similar crisis, Camus’ The Plague set in the 40s outlines the struggle between an epidemic and a community.

Dismissing the plague as a problem of sanitation, reality strikes as people are caught within its deadly grip. As they battle against life and nature, the absurdity of fighting a losing battle sinks in, making them almost give up if not for the efforts of a few members of the community like Dr Bernard Rieux, Raymond Rambert and Jean Tarrou. Against the background narrative of the plague, the novel is about individual struggles
and desires. All the characters - Dr. Rieux, the protagonist; Tarrou, the moralist who chronicles the ordeal, Raymond Rambert, the journalist who finds himself trapped in Oran; Joseph Grand who seeks to be the perfect writer, Father Paneloux, the priest or Cottard the smuggler - are victims of it. The struggle to come to terms with the conflict between their happiness and their sense of obligation is almost palpable. Rieux gets absorbed in his work not only because of a sense of commitment but also to distract himself from the absence of his wife who’s away in the hills. Tarrou, who had been witness to the proclamation of the death penalty by his father, a public prosecutor, joins the sanitary forces to pacify a troubled conscience guilty of having indirectly supported the deaths of thousands of men. Rambert gets involved with the sanitary forces realizing that the happiness of the community matters more than individual happiness after a vain attempt to get out of the quarantined city. Cottard who had tried to commit suicide, uses the plague which gives him a sense of solidarity with the others, as an undercover for his smuggling activities. Father Paneloux strongly believes that the plague is the punishment for the sins of the people of Oran. Ironically it is the plague that brings about in all of them a sense of togetherness and a desire to start again.

Through a fictional presentation of the scourge, Camus in *The Plague* not only deals with the theme of the absurd, represented by the meaningless and totally undeserved suffering and death brought about by the plague but goes further by developing the theme of revolt. Though on one level, the novel is an allegorical representation of the German occupation of France, it is also symbolic of the fight against evil and suffering, the major problem of human experience. As the plague brings untold destruction and misery, the people of Oran find themselves reeling under its deadly
impact. Although in the end the efforts of Rieux and his sanitary forces to contain the plague seem fruitful, only Dr Rieux knows it to be a temporary hiatus, aware that “the plague bacillus never dies or vanishes completely...and perhaps the day will come when...the plague will rouse its rats and send them to die in some well-contented city” (237-8).

3.1 THEMES

_The Plague_ is a story of the strength and victory of the human spirit as the inhabitants of Oran fight the bubonic plague. As every individual goes through a sense of loss, life at Oran is reduced to one of hopelessness and despair. People who had bid farewell to their loved ones for what they thought would be short separations suddenly find exiled from their loved ones, among them, Rieux from his wife who has been sent away to recuperate from an illness, and Rambert, from his wife in Paris. Over time when Rambert’s desperate attempts to leave Oran fail, he changes his mind and stays on to help, realizing that “there may be shame in being happy all by oneself” (162).

Exile and the anguish it entails is an important theme explored in _The Plague_. The condition of exile involves the idea of being separated or distanced from a homeland or from a cultural and ethnic origin. While expatriation implies a voluntary act or state, exile implies an involuntary act or state. Generally the term ‘expatriate’ refers to the first generation of free settlers in a colony while those born in the colony and cannot return to their place of origin despite wanting to, may be called exiles. Although ‘exile’ is a recurrent theme in Camus’ works, reflecting his own exile from Algeria, it is also reflective of the feeling that one experiences when one feels “not at home” or the refusal
to recognize the people with whom one shares one’s life. The term “exile” takes a deeper, metaphysical meaning when related to the shattering of the belief that human beings live in a world of reason where they can fulfill their hopes and desires and find meaning in life. As Camus says in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, (1955) "In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile”.

The sense of exile or rather isolation in the case of *The Plague*, is felt right in the beginning when Oran is described as a town “built with its back turned to the bay” making it “impossible to see the sea” despite it being “at the edge of a perfectly formed bay”(7). *The Plague* chronicles the imprisonment, exile, oppression and suffering experienced by the citizens of Oran when struck by the bubonic plague. The people of this sleepy town where life alternates between business and pleasure receive a jolt when the plague attacks. From the moment they realize that they are cut off from the rest of the world, the feeling of separation becomes from an individual one to that “of a whole people” as they experience “together with fear, the greatest agony of that long period of exile”(53). To add to their woes, not only is communication cut off from the rest of the country but even letter correspondence, due to fear of the disease being transmitted. Though initially a privileged few manage to sneak messages through the sentries, this is stopped, leading to an overcrowding at the public phone booths which in due time is restricted to emergency calls relating to births, deaths and marriages. When even this means of communication is blocked, they resort to telegrams, the only means left, condensing their painful passions in stock phrases like “Am well”, “Thinking of you”, “Affectionately yours” (54). Their attempts to get back their relatives who had left the town before the outbreak of the plague, is met with a warning that they would not be
allowed to leave again, leaving the citizens with no other choice but to wait for the epidemic to end. In the ensuing days, faced with an uncertain future, the inhabitants “suffered doubly”, from their own suffering and from what they “imagined to be that of the absent loved one”(56). Unable to accept the reality, they give up to “aimless days and sterile memories” and wander like “shadows who could only have found strength by resigning themselves to taking root in the soil of their distress” (57). The intensity of their feeling is best described by Rieux as “that hollow that we carried constantly inside us, that precise emotion, that unreasonable desire to go backwards or, on the contrary, to speed up the march of time, those burning arrows of memory” (56). If the exile at home was bad enough for those at Oran, it was worse for people like Rambert who “being travelers surprised by the plague in the town, they were separated not only from the person to whom they could not return, but from their homes as well”. Trapped in Oran, they are left to nourish “their pain with imponderable signs and disconcerting messages, like a flight of swallows, a rosy sunset or those peculiar rays that the sun sometimes casts on empty streets” (58). Feeling guilty for not having lived life to the fullest with their loved ones, they subjected themselves to a life of fantasy and unfulfilled dreams. The crisis brought about by the plague was even reflected in people’s reaction to the weather which till of late had made no impression upon them, caught as they were in the world of passion. Now it seemed to have a hold upon their lives, with their faces radiant with the golden rays of the sun and heavy with gloom on rainy days.

In the early days of the plague, people were not even aware when a victim succumbed to the plague, preoccupied as they were with the absence of their loved ones. Even the deserted scene on the quayside with the huge idle cranes, the trucks lying on
their sides and heaps of barrels unmoved, hardly made an impact on them. On the contrary they seemed perturbed by the restrictions posed upon them and sought relaxations in the restrictions. Even the rationing of supplies and the shutting down of shops did not affect them as wine stores and cinemas continued to draw crowds. As the numbers given out by the prefecture began to swell and life came to a standstill, realization about the severity of the crisis dawned on them. To the problem of the increasing fatalities, a larger crisis loomed, that of the disposal of the dead.

Death is an important theme treated in *The Plague*. The people of Oran at first believe that “a pestilence does not have human dimensions, so people tell themselves that it is unreal, that it is a bad dream which will end”(30), and refuse to accept a plague that “negates the future, negates journeys and debates”(31). Only Dr. Rieux is aware of the deadly form the disease can assume and expresses his concern to Dr. Richard,

“When a microbe is capable of increasing the size of the spleen four times in three days, and of making the mesenteric ganglia the size of an orange and the consistency of porridge, that is precisely when we should rush to do something….it doesn’t matter whether you call it plague or growing pains. All that matters is that you stop it killing half the town” (39).

When Dr. Richard finally accepts saying, “so we must take the responsibility of acting as though the disease were the plague”, Rieux retorts “Let’s just say that we should not act as though half the town were not threatened with death, because then it would be” (40). As death spreads to ensnare more people, the reality of their helpless condition sinks in and their passivity in managing the crisis is apparent as they become mere shadows drifting through life, waiting for their turn.
To Tarrou who had lived through difficult times, it was one’s duty to keep a constant watch over oneself in order not to infect another since “on this earth there are pestilences and victims – and as far as possible one must refuse to be on the side of the pestilence”(195). How one faces death, disease and crisis depends on one’s beliefs and inner strength. While Rieux, Rambert and Tarrou represent the humanist belief that there is no rational explanation for the outbreak of the epidemic, the Jesuit priest, Father Paneloux believes there is, and explains it from the religious perspective that “the scourge of God” has been sent to bring “down the proud and the blind beneath His feet”(74) and that “God, who so long bent the face of pity towards this town” was tired of waiting and has let them languish “in the darkness of the plague”(74). In this larger plan of life, there is nothing that the townsfolk can do except to surrender to His wishes absolutely, love what cannot be understood and try to learn what one can from it. Paneloux’s argument, based on the theology of St. Augustine that the plague is a retribution for the sins, is accepted by most people, including the magistrate Othon. Only Rieux refutes it on the grounds that even if it were so, nothing could be more cruel than choosing an innocent child. Having witnessed the agonizing death of the magistrate’s son, along with Rieux and Tarrou, Father Paneloux is moved to pity and in the second sermon tells the people that despite being forced to yield to the divine will, one should do whatever good one is capable of.

Torn between faith and the painful scene of the dying boy, Father Paneloux finds himself in a moral crisis, more so with Rieux pointing out that a God who remains unmoved in the helpless suffering of an innocent child does not deserve to be worshipped. A man, steadfast in his principles, Paneloux not only refuses to see a doctor but also
refuses to be treated when he falls ill. Resigning to the will of God, he dies clinging to the cross and what remains of his beliefs, implying perhaps that the loss of faith led him to his death. In contrast, Tarrou who staunchly believes in living life according to an ethical code puts up a valiant fight. The plague, in his view, is not just a specific disease or some impersonal evil existing outside of human beings. It is a destructive impulse within every human being that needs to be looked out for and it is one’s moral duty not to be a carrier of germs.

To Camus, “Christianity is a doctrine of injustice. It is founded on the sacrifice of the innocent and the acceptance of this sacrifice” (The Rebel). The unjust killing of Jesus, considered a necessary sacrifice by Christians, is paradoxical to him as Christianity failed to justify the taking of an innocent life. Instead it found solace in transcending and minimizing the reality of human suffering. Since the truth is that evil and death are part of man’s condition, life has to be confronted first before the question of submitting or revolting against God. Illustrating the incident where the young boy dies suffering from the disease, Camus feels that if God has remained a mute witness to a world where the innocent are tortured, then He is unjust. If God is to be accepted as a sovereign being, there seems to be a gulf between the sufferings of men and the designs of God, resulting in a tension which demands submission or revolt.

The ravages of the plague convey the absurdist position that human beings take in an indifferent, incomprehensible world that defies rational meaning or order. In the face of this metaphysical reality, what should the response of individuals be? Should they resign to it accepting it as the inevitable or should they fight back even though they are certain of a futile end? Dr. Rieux vouches for the latter, “when you see the suffering and
pain that it brings, you have to be mad, blind or a coward to resign yourself to the plague” (96) fully conscious that “since the order of the world is governed by death, perhaps it is better for God” that we “struggle against death, without raising our eyes to heaven and to His silence”. Even when Tarrou tells him that in that case, his victories “will always be temporary”, Rieux’s response is “but that is not a reason to give up the struggle” (98).

Influenced by the multiple crises of the mid 20th century, Camus’s writings display great sensitivity to moral ambiguities and individual suffering. Through the sense of exile, alienation, disease, death and decay, Camus gives a picturesque account of the physical suffering of the plague victims and the mental and emotional distress of the people walled up in the city of Oran. Beyond the historical event that it represents and the pain of human existence as the plague closes in upon its victims, is the absurdity of existence itself. Although any position that man may assume in a world whose end is inevitable death, is absurd, nevertheless, he needs to fight, taking a moral stand, not only for a meaningful existence but also to avert a situation that could lead to the unsettling of the social order.

### 3.2 CHARACTERIZATION

Crises may be viewed from different perspectives. While some attach a religious significance to it and some believe in the need to uphold the moral code, there are others who are passive to it. The attitude of the characters depicted in The Plague exemplify those of living beings. As the inhabitants of Oran come face to face with the plague, one is witness to how human beings are likely to react when faced with a crisis. To Paneloux, the plague was God’s way of punishing sinners, a step He was forced to take to make the
people realize their wrongdoings and which was intended for their good. To Dr. Rieux, being true to one’s moral conscience means to be true to his medical profession, of curing people even if it is at the cost of happiness. To others, like the asthmatic old man who resigns to it, the plague is what life is about. Every individual in Oran goes through a harrowing experience either as a victim or under threat of becoming a victim as the plague progresses, spreading its tentacles of disease, death and decay.

Dr. Bernard Rieux, the public health physician is the first to realize the presence of the plague and react to it. Refusing to be cowed down by it, Rieux is able to put the evils of the plague in a historical and sociological perspective and to go about courageously to alleviate the sufferings of his brethren. Applying all his scientific and medical knowledge to fight the scourge that is rapidly sweeping the town, Rieux is adamant that strict measures be enforced to tackle the disease. Refusing to judge on a personal level, he denies Rambert a certificate vouching that he is free of the plague because there is no way to determine it and yet he does not grudge Rambert his right to happiness and will not stand in the way of his attempts to leave the town. His efforts to make the people understand the plague in its historical perspective yields results, making the task of mobilizing forces to fight the plague, easier. When asked by Tarrou if he too thought like Father Paneloux that the plague had its benefits as it made people think, Rieux’s response is “what is true of the ills of this world is also true of the plague” (96).

Rieux’s moral growth is subtly delineated during the course of the narrative. He detaches himself from the community but his attitude towards the community alternates between sympathy as well as an ironic judgment of them. He refers to the suffering men as “we” but describes their attitude as the foolish behavior of “our foolish citizens”. Dr.
Rieux is torn between the desire to be the spokesman of the community he wants to be part of and his own feelings of scorn towards his fellowmen. Not interested in sainthood or heroism, Rieux’s purpose in recording the events in Oran is “to bear witness on behalf of the victims, to leave at least a memory of the violence and injustice that was done to them” and to show the learning outcome of such tribulations – “that there is more in men to admire than to despise”. Unable to see people dying, Rieux’s firm belief is that “despite their own personal hardships”, all men should “by refusing to give way to the pestilence, do their best to be doctors” (237).

Rieux the man is overshadowed by Rieux the doctor in the novel. All that is known about Rieux’s personal life is that he has sent away his wife to the hills for treatment and at the station they promise each other “to start again”(10) on her return, implying perhaps that there may have been some marital discord. His passion for ordinary pleasures is seen when he accepts to go swimming with Tarrou, “of course a man should fight for the victims. But if he ceases to love anything else, then what is the point in fighting?” and at the sight of the sea “is filled with a strange happiness as he could feel the pitted face of the rock under his fingers” (197). As for his social life, it is obvious that he is compassionate to all, be it Michel, the concierge; the old man sorting the chick peas, Rambert who is furious that he is not given a clearance certificate, Grand who’s trying to write the perfect story, or Judge Othon’s son who succumbs painfully to the plague. Rieux is a humanist who believes in the strength of mankind. When Father Paneloux tries to explain the death of the judge’s son saying “perhaps we should love what we cannot understand”, Rieux responds, “No, Father, I have a different notion of love; and to the day I die I shall refuse to love this creation in which children are
tortured” (169). When the priest regrets that he had not been able to convince him through his religious conviction, Rieux replies, “What does it matter? What I hate is death and evil…. And whether you accept this or not, we are together in enduring them and fighting against them”(170).

Through the character of Rieux, Camus conveys that in a world wrought by trials and tribulations, whose end is inevitable death, it would be more meaningful to find a purpose in living. All the characters in The Plague have a role to play in the drama that enfolds in Oran. Through a realistic portrayal of the characters, Camus gives a touch of authenticity to them. Paneloux is representative of people who have an unflinching faith in God and believe that everything happens according to His will. Tarrou represents people with a strong moral conscience who will fight all odds against injustice while Dr. Rieux to whom duty, love and empathy towards fellow beings matter above all else, is an epitome of goodness. Then there are people who are more concerned about their personal interests like Rambert and others like Cottard who will resort to unlawful means for a living. Judge Othon is the conscience keeper of the nation, upholding the law and Grand is the simpleton who would go all the way out to please his heart’s desire. The old asthma patient who has no hold upon life turns out to be the philosopher trying to explain the meaning of life and the man who spits on the cats, a misanthrope. All the characters in The Plague are men of flesh and blood who feel despair and loneliness, form friendships, hate suffering, grieve over deaths and at the same time take on challenges.

To Father Paneloux, the plague is the result of the wrong doings of the people of Oran. According to him, God had been really patient and had been pushed to the extreme of sending the plague to teach them a lesson and open their eyes so that they should
repent and seek forgiveness. In the first Sunday sermon after the outbreak of the plague which had already claimed a number of victims, Father Paneloux launches a scathing attack on his listeners, “My brethren, a calamity has befallen you; my brethren, you have deserved it”(73). Quoting the passage from Exodus about the plague in Egypt which was sent to strike down the enemies of God and which brought the Pharaoh, who opposed the designs of the Eternal, to his knees, Paneloux says, “since the beginning of history, the scourge of God has brought down the proud and the blind beneath His feet”(74).

Referring to the plague as the divine punishment for their sins, he says that only the unjust need fear as “the implacable flail will thresh the human corn until the chaff is divided from the grain and there will be more chaff than grain” (74). According to his Christian belief, God had given mankind a long rope hoping that they would repent for all their evil ways. Unfortunately people had taken His mercy for granted and had not repented. It was too late now and “God, who has so long bent the face of pity towards this town, is tired of waiting; disappointed in his eternal hope, He has turned away His face” (74). Referring to the plague which ravaged Rome in the Golden Legend, Father Paneloux is convinced that “no earthly power – not even, vain science-can shield you from this hand as it reaches out to you and beaten on the bloody threshing floor of pain, you will be cast out with the chaff”(75). Saying that the only way to salvation in the midst of this suffering is absolute surrender and complete faith in the divine will, Father Paneloux calls upon the people to offer Heaven the word of love.

Upon witnessing the painful manner in which Judge Othon’s son succumbs to the plague there is a change in Father Paneloux which is evident in his second sermon. Assuming a softer tone, he uses “we” instead of “you” and goes on to say that rather than
try to explain the phenomenon of the plague, one must try and learn what one can from it. He ends his sermon saying that though the suffering of a child cannot be explained away, “the love of God is a difficult love. It assumes a total abandonment of oneself and contempt for one’s person” (176) and because it is impossible to understand it, one has no alternative but to submit completely to it. His trust in the Lord remains steadfast till his end.

Raymond Rambert, the journalist makes every possible attempt to get out of the plague-stricken city, even requesting Dr. Rieux for a certificate vouching that he does not have the disease. When Rieux refuses, asking him to cover the report of the plague instead, he retorts, “it’s ridiculous. I wasn’t put on this earth to make reports, but perhaps I was put on earth to live with a woman”(66). Insisting that his personal happiness counts above public welfare, and living and dying for what one loves is what interests him, Rambert is determined and gets in touch with agencies that help people get out of Oran for a price. On learning from Tarrou that Rieux was also separated from his wife, Rambert’s attitude changes and when Rieux tells him that there was no shame in choosing happiness, he replies, “But there may be shame in being happy all by oneself….But now that I have seen what I have seen, I know that I come from here, whether I like it or not” (162).

In the beginning all that is known about Jean Tarrou, is that he had settled in Oran a few weeks earlier, that he was seen everywhere, especially on the beach, that he seemed to enjoy swimming and that he spent time with the Spanish dancers and musicians. His role quickly assumes significance when it is learnt that he is the one chronicling the happenings at Oran from day one. With a keen eye for details, it is from Tarrou that one
learns about the ugly town, about the man who spat on cats, about Judge Othon’s family, about Dr. Rieux and most importantly about the presence of dead rats for the first time. It is Tarrou who volunteers to be in charge of the health squads to fight against the plague despite Dr. Rieux warning him that it could be fatal. Sharing his life’s experiences with Rieux, he informs that as a son of a prosecuting counsel, his had been an easy life till he had accompanied his father to a hearing. Hearing his father seek the death sentence for a criminal, he was shocked and had left home. Determined to fight against death sentences, he had become a rebel, fighting against the established order until he realized one day that he was also indirectly responsible for death sentences. Ever since he had “decided to reject everything that, directly or indirectly, makes people die or justifies others in making them die” (195), though he is sure of one thing – “that everyone has inside it himself, this plague” and it is important to keep a constant watch on oneself in order not to find oneself “breathing in another person’s face and infecting him” (195). Ironically just when the town seemed liberated from the plague, Tarrou falls victim to it, making Rieux who had become close to him, feel “that this time, it was the definitive defeat, the one that ends wars and makes of peace itself an irremediable suffering” (223). Tarrou comes across as a friendly and trustworthy person, making even Cottard discuss his unclean moral conscience with him. Tarrou is the alter ego of Camus. Through him, Camus expresses his views on the death penalty and the injustice meted out to the Arabs of Algeria by the French colonizers. Strongly of the view that man had no right to take another’s life, he believed that man was responsible for crises.

A municipal clerk whose wife had left him because of lack of attention and failing to advance in his career, Joseph Grand, a man of fifty, struggles to write a perfect novel.
A man of true grit and spirit, he joins the health teams readily. Grand embodies the courage of the sanitary squads as he goes about his work diligently relegating to the little time available, his narcissistic pursuit of the perfect phrase. In the midst of this routine, Rieux finds him outside a toy shop during Christmastime and knew what was in the mind of the man who was weeping – “that this world without love was like a dead world and that there always comes a time when one grows tired of prisons, work and courage, and yearns for the face of another human being and the wondering, affectionate heart” (201). Though he asks Rieux to burn the drafts of his precious first sentence when he falls sick, he is determined to start afresh when he recovers. In this plague stricken world, Grand is a character who exudes humaneness and optimism.

Living in the same quarters as Grand and describing himself as a travelling salesman in wines and spirits, Cottard, an eccentric character tries to commit suicide by hanging in his room to avoid getting caught for a crime committed in the past. As the plague sweeps Oran, this is one person who takes solace in it as everyone else is as vulnerable to the plague as he is and thrives on the smuggling trade. When the plague ends, his anxiety increases to the point of insanity and in the shootout that ensues with the police, he is killed. Here was one who had found refuge in the crisis brought about the plague.

M. Othon the magistrate is “tall thin man whose hard little round eyes, his slender nose and his straight mouth make him look like a well- trained owl” (23). With a wife “as tiny as a black mouse” and two children, a boy and a girl “dressed like performing dogs”, M. Othon is a disciplinarian. He is shattered when his son falls victim to the plague and
on his return from the isolation camp, desires to go back to work there, to feel closer to his son but sadly, he too succumbs to the disease.

Women characters are not directly involved in Camus’s *The Plague*. They are in the background, quite unseen and unheard, with casual references made to them. In the beginning of the novel, one hears of dead rats for the first time when Rieux sends off his wife who’s been ill for a year to recuperate in the mountains. From time to time, Rieux hears from her and just when the city gates are opened, he gets a telegram informing him of her demise. Although it does not come as a surprise to him, he nevertheless is pained and realizes that he has to start afresh. Grand’s wife Jeanne, whom he married at a young age is said to be so tiny that he used to fear for her safety when she crossed the road. Caught up in his work most of his time, he had not given her the desired love resulting in her deserting him, saying that she needed to make a fresh start. When the plague subsides, Grand writes to her expressing his feelings.

The absence of his wife who is in Paris is felt strongly by Rambert who constantly refers to her. The intensity of their love is evident when “his tears flow without knowing if they came from his present happiness or from a pain too long repressed” (227) as they are united at the end. Dr Rieux’s mother, a silver haired woman with soft, dark eyes who comes to look after him in the absence of his wife, remains a silent figure offering him moral support and concern. Her quiet presence and comforting words seem the only source of solace to Rieux whose tireless efforts bear little fruit. That Rieux values her unconditional love and concern although neither of them expresses the love they have for each other is also obvious. Her concern for others is evident when she readily asks to accommodate the sick Tarrou and takes care of him, making Tarrou see in her the same
self-effacement that his mother had and admire her simple way of expressing things. At the sight of her son looking tired and defeated after the death of his friend, she proposes that he go to rest in the mountains. Hers’ is a serene presence which offers quiet solace and represents the ideal mother figure. Although the women characters in *The Plague* are not developed beyond the ideal human happiness they represent, perhaps because women then were considered only as providers of emotional security, Dr Rieux’s mother is an exception. Madame Rieux does not play any major role in the drama but the strength of her character and the respect she commands is obvious from the reverential treatment meted out to her by Rieux and Tarrou. Her ghostly but poignant presence bears resemblance to the quiet but strong half deaf mother of Camus who brought up her two boys in harsh and poverty stricken conditions in the working quarter of Belcourt, Algiers, after the death of her husband in the Battle of Marne in 1914. Rieux’s wife could be a reference to Camus’s own first wife, Simone Hié, a morphine addict and a marriage which did not work. Rambert’s wife left behind in Paris can be seen Camus’ wife Francine Faure who was stuck in Algeria while he was in France during the German occupation of France in 1942 and in Grand’s wife, Camus’ desire to please the ideal woman.

While the men are painted as strong and passionate characters, the women are just weak objects of the men’s desires. Rieux’s wife is described as someone sick. Rambert is forcefully separated from his wife. Grand languishes for his wife who has deserted him much before the arrival of the plague. Rieux’s mother sits by the window waiting for her son. Other than to express concern for each other, there’s not much interaction between the two. Tarrou, devastated by his father’s harsh role dismisses his mother’s role as a
passive one because of her poverty. While the male longing for female company is made evident, the feelings of the women characters can only be imagined. Though the reason for the near absence of women in *The Plague* is not clear, perhaps it is the unconscious attitude of Camus towards women or the fact that the novel was written in the 40s when women were expected to play only the subservient role of looking after the hearth. This may be a narrow outlook of the times as women have played a significant role in many a novel of the 40s.

One of the major trends of modern French literature has been the marginalization of women authors due to the dominance of fascist and other right–wing influences early in the century. Much debate has centred on this subject suggesting that male sexuality and misogyny are the causes for the suppression of women in the political and intellectual areas. The scene changed during the post war years with the emergence of feminist writing.

The crisis brought about by the plague evokes varied responses, both active and passive. As the plague spreads to affect all spheres of life, social, economic and political, with the threat of dire consequences, spelling disorder and chaos, there is fear and alarm. While the strong react valiantly to it, the weak submit helplessly. Amidst these reactions, the handling of the crisis by Dr. Rieux stands out like a beacon in the midst of distress and despair. His determination to fight the plague by mobilizing the health forces is remarkable. Rieux’ efforts in the face of adversity is reminiscent of Camus’ own faith in humanity and his philosophy of the need to fight against all odds even if it means fighting a losing battle.
The human attitudes and actions exemplified by the characters in this absorbing narrative are typical of how human beings would react in similar situations. In life as in the novel, there are people like Dr. Rieux and Tarrou who, true to their moral conscience, fight for a cause, a Rambert to whom personal happiness matters above everything else and a Paneloux who staunchly believes that everything happens in line with the dictates of God. While Rieux’s involvement in the fight against the plague arises not only because of his commitment to his medical profession, but also as a human being who will do his best to alleviate suffering, Tarrou’s stand is that of one who is troubled by a conscience seeking to absolve itself of any injustice done to man directly or indirectly. Father Paneloux sees the divine light of God in the most catastrophic events and urges the people to accept the plague as a strengthening experience.

3.3 POINT OF VIEW

*The Plague* is an intensely personal book of Camus where “he put something of himself—his emotions, his memories and his sense of place” (Juditix). Among the many interpretations that *The Plague* subjects itself to, it can also be read as “a private baptism of fire, a metaphoric journey through his (Camus’) own pulmonary system”, struck as he was with tuberculosis at the age of twenty-seven. (Mairowitz and Korkos) A sharp contrast to Algiers, his hometown, Camus found Oran, a boring and materialistic place. Crossing over to France in August 1942 to convalesce; Camus was cut off from his wife and his mother in Algeria when the Germans occupied the south of France. It is not unusual therefore that the themes of illness, exile and separation feature in *The Plague*. Camus put himself directly into three of his characters; Rambert, who is desperate to
escape from Oran but who finally joins the health forces; Dr. Rieux, who despite sharing the same fate, is keen to fight the scourge; and Tarrou, his moral spokesman. Camus’ humanist stance is evident when Tarrou says, “All I know is that one must do one’s best not to be a plague victim…And this is why I have decided to reject everything that, directly or indirectly, makes people die or justifies others in making them die” (194-5).

As Tony Judt says, “the allegory may have been tied to Vichy France but the plague ‘transcends’ political labels, hitting out at “dogma, conformity, compliance and cowardice in all their intersecting public forms….Camus was a moralist who unhesitatingly distinguished good from evil, but abstained from condemning human frailty”. Camus has been able to carefully intertwine in his work of art; the moralist’s values without making it appear so. At no point does the novel become so obsessive for the reader to overlook the bare prose that sustains neither it nor the moral maxims that are part of it. The transition from a simple narrative to a chronicle, from realism to allegory, from the individual to the collective is so natural that the impact on the reader is more forceful. The epidemic of the plague which breaks out in Oran in the 40s is the symbol of a historical reality. The plight of a city which becomes its own prisoner, cut off from the free world except through memory, imagination and rare messages, in a world of exile and separation, of suffering and brotherhood, is too obvious to miss. But the city that fell prey to the plague need not be an allusion to France under the German occupation alone. It can be any city that is struck by any of the thousand plagues that torment mankind in every age.

Most of the narration in The Plague is in the third person but throughout the story, there is the first person plural to give authenticity to the distraught situation the people of
Oran are in, much like the year 1947 when the French found themselves in the hands of the Germans after the military defeat and the abandonment of the Republic. The reference to the divided condition of France in the 40s is evident when Camus says, “It was as though the very soil on which our houses were built was purging itself of an excess of bile, that it was letting boils and abscesses rise to the surface, which up to then had been devouring it inside” (15).

The story is narrated by Tarrou, or Rieux as we come to know later, who recounts what he observes rather than interpret it. The same objectivity is maintained for his own reflections as well as the remarks of others. Camus or rather Rieux disguises himself by referring to himself in the third person to give an impression of an unnamed narrator who recounts what he has personally seen and heard about the epidemic as well as from the diary of Tarrou who pens his observations. In his tone is heard the voice of Camus himself who deliberately assumes the tone of an impartial observer so as not to sound too moralistic. Exercising restraint in the execution of his narrative style which sometimes tends to be a little dry, Camus’ succeeds in making his readers experience the suffering from the plague by recounting the events as they unfold in the town of Oran and describing the impact of the plague on each individual either directly or indirectly.

Looking back on the 20th century it is evident that Camus had touched upon the moral dilemmas of the age and that the plague that he refers to is an evil that may assume varying forms in different ages. It could be in the natural catastrophes that come without warning like the tsunamis, the earthquakes and the hurricanes or it could be the result of man’s avarice which manifests in killing, looting and plundering. The pervasiveness of the plague is that it is part of everyday life, forming the fabric of life that people fail to
notice. The underlying message of *The Plague* is that evil and suffering are part of the abstractions of life. How one faces up to it is important and since it is part of a routine it is all the more imperative that one needs to be cautious. Through Rambert one comes face to face with the truth that individual fulfillment cannot happen. Since man is part of a community that relies on moral compulsions, what he chooses to do matters even if the choice to decide is his. Though the fight against the plague seems to have limited value, it does teach something of the nature of life as it forces the other characters to reexamine their values and consider their experience in a new light as they go through extraordinary changes. Through the plague and its forced quarantine, the people of Oran come to understand the importance of relationships and the meaning of life, that the life that they took for granted could be reduced to nothing with just one calamity.

Subtle irony also features in Camus’ narrative style as is seen in the description of the administrative structures of Oran which lay more emphasis on paperwork and systems rather than the human element. The information about the dangers of the pestilence is disseminated through posters put up in the most remote corners of the city. The organizations concerned are more preoccupied with setting up a system of decorations than looking for better ways to tackle the disease. Even Dr. Richard, who refuses to admit that the city is facing a plague crisis, is pleased with the system used to chart the plague victims. More than being concerned with the increasing number of deaths, the prefect is satisfied with the speedy disposal of the dead, enough for Rieux to comment that careful records are being maintained, showing progress. Ironically the plague also makes progress.
Oran, where Camus had been unhappy and bored, forms the perfect setting for the unfolding of the drama that is enacted, more so as this city located near the Mediterranean sea on a bare plateau, at the edge of a perfectly formed bay, has its back turned to the bay, making it impossible to see the sea. Despite the elements of the Algerian landscape that he loved, Oran is shown to be influenced by the banality of a modern urban city. Given this physical description of the place, visualizing the citizens closed in, cut off from the rest of the world, and following the characters and the events as they unfold is not difficult.

In this somewhat ordinary narrative, flashes of emotion can be experienced during the agonizing death of Judge Othon’s son; when the singer who plays the role of Orpheus collapses on stage during the performance of the opera or the feel of the water during the night swim that Rieux and Tarrou enjoy together. In his book on Camus, Philip H. Rhein feels that these moments of identification are rare “for an essential detachment from both the characters and their situation must be maintained in order that the reader can readily transfer his thoughts from the literal to the figurative level of the novel and thereby be constantly aware of the symbolical inferences being made by the author.” (Rhein, 64, quoted in Severson)

Camus’ political thought has always focused on the moral consequences of human action in an absurd and unhappy world. In a world of suffering, Camus propounds authentic rebellion that should begin with the individual and progress into an act of solidarity encompassing all human beings that would serve to give dignity to human existence and even bring about a sense of community. At the same time, in the response to suffering, the risk of the rebellion rejecting the whole of creation and ending in more
suffering cannot be ruled out. In fact in the 20th century there were more of such metaphysical revolts which led to rebellion. This metaphysical rebellion leads to a loss of sense and judgment resulting in revolution. As Camus says, "When rebellion, in rage or intoxication, adopts the attitude of 'all or nothing' and the negation of all existence and all human nature, it is at this point that it denies itself…. Rebellion's demand is unity; historical revolution's demand is totality" (Camus 250-51). The absurd can be understood only through reason and the best way to get reason across is through art, preferably through fiction. The novel with its distinctive form has an advantage over philosophy because of its ability to get across with a “sense of unity and coherence as it can provide conclusions that reality cannot” (Camus 253). Since the human condition is made up of the absurd as well as the noble, the articulation of the human experience can best be brought about through the use of symbols. Symbols help to concretize abstract thoughts. Through the deconstruction and reconstruction of symbols, Camus examines the idea of revolt as a reaction. Although revolt is a reaction against human suffering and injustice, beginning in solitude it should progress to encompass the whole society.

The Nazi occupation of France was a stifling period which saw bureaucracy, camps, isolation, separation from loved ones, rationing and black marketing. Though Camus’ chronicle was conceived as early as 1939, it was begun only after the German occupation of France. Almost all the ideas in The Plague reveal Camus’s concern for a truthful realism. The metaphysical ideas of the absurd are strongly rooted in the novel. Taking the underlying theme of separation, Camus has dealt with it in various ways – separation from the loved ones, separation of the living and the dead, separation from family and relatives as the victims are put into isolation camps; and separation of the
Oranians from nature. The people who fight the plague resemble the members of the Resistance. Cottard the smuggler represents the black marketers. The disposal of the ever increasing deadly burning is a reminder of the extermination camps of World War II. Paneloux’s first sermon is a reflection of the official pronouncements made by the French Catholic Church blaming the French people for the fall of France. The sense of struggle and solidarity can equally be extended to any war, government or event that has a powerful impact on its people.

More than any special historical event, *The Plague* can be interpreted as an understanding of human existence with its inevitable suffering. Right from the physical suffering of the victims of the plague to the mental and emotional distress of all the people imprisoned within the walls of a city, the inhumanity of life is evident as the plague closes in. In this world there is no escape from evil and suffering. The manner in which man responds to evil will determine the meaning of his existence. The novel scores primarily because of its ability to make human beings aware that even if the absurdity of the world cannot be transformed, one can resist. Victory against the plague cannot be certain but the struggle can be carried on by “all men who, while not being saints, but refusing to give way to the pestilence, do their best to be doctors”(237). The humanist that he was, Camus’ commitment was to humanity and his chronicle reflects in allegorical form, the preoccupations of the 20th century which is as relevant in the 21st century which is witness to many an upheaval the world over, causing so much of violence, destruction, pain and suffering.

As Camus’ narrator says, “There have been as many plagues in the world as there have been wars, yet plagues and wars always find people equally unprepared”(30). The
people of Oran initially dismiss the dying of the rats as a bad dream, “but it does not always end and, from one bad dream to the next, it is people who end, humanists first of all because they have not prepared themselves” (30). The moral fable of *The Plague* is about human beings and about their responses to the dreaded disease than the disease itself. Camus does not present life as a sugar coated pill, tempting people to endure suffering or evil for future rewards. Denouncing evil, he offers human dignity to men who will end suffering through action. Man is free to determine his fate. The central message of the novel is that since evil and suffering is part of human existence, how man engages with it is important which includes the moral choices he makes. Camus through Rieux exemplifies the engagement to forestall evil, gets others to experience evil and suffering and leads them to transcend it. Within this existential context, the human experience counts above all. Dr. Rieux is right when he says, “What’s true of the ills of this world is also true of the plague. It may serve to make some people great” (96). To Rambert, the journalist, the plague stands for human affairs. To Rieux, it is a dark and obscure challenge that can only be met with the equally multiple mystery called life. As Rieux says to Rambert, “It’s about decency. It may seem a ridiculous idea, but the only way to fight the plague is with decency” (125). To Father Paneloux, the plague is the flail of God with the saving grace being that it opens men’s eyes and forces them to repent.

Despite the victory over the plague, only Rieux, or Camus knows that it can recur and that precisely, is the irony of the situation. It is an absurdity that must be confronted, as reflected in Tarrou’s words; “it is very tiring to be a plague victim. But it is still more tiring not to want to be one since those who want to cease to be victims, experience an extreme form of tiredness from which nothing except death will deliver them” (195).
Just as the rest of the absurdist writers like Kafka, Ionesco and Becket, Camus believed that the universe is irrational and unintelligible. It cannot satisfy the human need for order or fulfill human hopes and aspirations. As Ionesco put it, “Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (Abrams11). Exiled therefore in an indifferent universe, human beings must make their way through their bleak, insignificant existence in the best possible way, finding meaning in the process. This point of view establishes the fact that crisis is a part of life that spares none and the only way out is to find ways to cope with it.

Through the plague, Camus illustrates the human reaction to an absurd situation. The existential crisis of man is that he is born into a world which is irrational. The confrontation of consciousness with the irrational is what makes life, absurd. Addressing the inevitability of evil whether human actions are intended to be good or evil, Camus suggests that an honest encounter with the absurd world, though paradoxical, will result in a meaningful existence. Oran under siege by the threat of the plague bears resemblance to the extermination camps, the piled up dead bodies, shattered families and the brutal treatment of them during the Holocaust. The main focus of Camus’s novel is not just life but the life of individuals that can change or reflect a change in society as a whole.