ESSAY

AHMED SOFA AND ALBERT CAMUS: Two intellectuals against the plague of society

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On the surface, the life and literary work of the iconoclastic intellectual from Bangladesh, Ahmed Sofa, and the timeless novel *The Plague* (1947) by French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus seem to be born of two widely divergent geographical and political environments. One was written in the setting of the post-World War II European disillusionment, fascism and existential fears, and the other, a post-colonial Bangladesh, Liberation War and political and social decay. But, a close examination of the theoretical undergrowth and implicit philosophies of their work shows a remarkable spiritual and philosophical unity between the thinkers of these two worlds. Their thought is humanistic existentialist, an uncompromising combat against the 'plague' of social degradation, and the dispassionate moral obligation of the intellectual.



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

Camus's philosophy was rooted in the idea of the Absurd, or the meaninglessness inherent in life. Plague is a sudden outbreak of an epidemic in the Algerian city of Oran that is not just a disease but a deep metaphor for an irrational devastation thrown at the life of humankind. This plague represents fascism which is laying siege to human freedom. This "absurdity" is very much there in the life and literature of Ahmed Sofa, but not in the European sense, rather as a third-world political absurdity. *Alatachakra* (1985) or *Gabhi Bittanto* (1995) show us a society which is struck by a moral and intellectual epidemic in Sofa's novels. If the spirit of the Liberation War is plundered in the case of independent Bangladesh and if intellectuals turn into scavengers of power, that reality of the society turns as besieged and senseless as Camus's Oran. Like Camus, who celebrated man's futile but heroic struggle against The Plague, Sofa's essay "Buddhibrittir Natun Binnash" was his personal and philosophical stand against the rot of institutions and The Plague.

In Camus' novel, *The Plague* is a sinister entity that infects all, and for which there is no way out. The people of Oran first try to ignore the epidemic, then panic, and finally rebel against it. Sofa's "plague" is the mental subservientness, the lack of backbone and political opportunism of Bengali society as seen in the literature. Sofa's characterisation of high-level corruption and sycophancy in the university in *Gabhi Bittanto* is a mirror image of a horrendous social scourge. The dirty political politics of everyone from the vice-chancellor to the teachers, played around an ox, are just as harmful as Camus' metaphorical epidemic. In Sofa's novel, The Plague wipes out the intellect and conscience of a nation while in Camus' book, plague kills the human body. Both authors have shown that a plague shatters masks, revealing the deepest selfishness of humanity and its ability to make the greatest of sacrifices and show the greatest empathy.

The Plague's main character, Dr. Bernard Rieux, is not a typical hero. He has no faith in God, and he doesn't utter political dogma. He's just doing what doctors do. In one of the famous dialogues in the novel Dr. Rieux remarks that The Plague offers no heroism, it is a matter of common decency. To him decency is nothing more than doing his job. The closest portrait of Dr. Rieux can be seen in Ahmed Sofa's life and view of the writer. All of the time, Sofa was far away from the halls of power. To him, the job of an intellectual was the same as Dr. Rieux's: When a society has a disease, tell the truth and cure them. Like Dr. Rieux's refusal of performative heroism, sofa's absolute disdain for state awards, institutional recognition or media fanfare. During the great Liberation War of 1971, he used his pen, he came out to the streets to fight against autocracy in this newly formed country and he inspired young writers, all in the name of conscience, in the name of his 'decency'. Like Dr. Rieux, Sofa never gave up in the struggle against The Plague of political and cultural epidemics in Bangladesh.

The worst afflictions of the citizens of Oran in the time of plague was the agony of exile: a besieged city, isolated from their dear ones. Ahmed Sofa's life was also a story of great isolation intellectually. He was an optimist and lived out his life honestly and without compromise, and this brought him into conflict with the opportunist society of his day. The culmination of this loneliness is in his *Pushpa Brikkha Ebong Bihanga Puran* (1996). Like Camus' second characters, who find temporary solace by swimming in the sea to escape the terror of The Plague, Sofa, disillusioned with humanity, finds a refuge in flowers, vines and birds. His keen interest in plants and animal life on his roof wasn't just a nature-loving pastime, it was a way to make sense of the world in an absurd, meaningless earth. Humanity is destroyed in the process and although society crumbles, nature is the last place one can turn. Sofa's botanical and avian mythos is a quiet celebration of the very same philosophy as Camus' philosophy, the joy of living amongst the void.

The famous words of Camus were "I rebel; therefore we exist." The Plague is about how Dr. Rieux, Tarrou and Rambert transcend individual isolation to create a community, the sanitary squads. They know The Plague may never end; giving up without a fight is not human nature. In the life and in the works of Ahmed Sofa is this very story of a collective resistance. He did not write just for himself. The reverence he displays towards Abdur Razzaq in Jadyapi *Amar Guru* (1998) is an intellectual journey in search of a nation. Sofa felt that such a social evil or corruption could only be fought with a mass mental reawakening. He was the core of that opposition. Every time the country was in trouble—in military autocracy, or communal riots, or cultural imperialism, Sofa was in the front with his own 'sanitary squad': his pen and his young disciples. Sofa, like Camus's characters in *The Plague*, struggled to preserve the dignity of the human person through his writings, and the dignity of the Bengali people through the struggle.

Stylistically the two are quite similar. The novel that Camus wrote is like a diary or a journalistic report; it's dispassionate, like nothing is happening, yet it's very passionate, burning under the surface. He didn't embellish the terror of the epidemic with frills. The prose of Ahmed Sofa is also plain, pointed and taut. His essays lack any pretence, his novels any mawkish sentiment. In *Alatachakra*, the raw depiction of the refugee camps is without imagination, and without the bias of any dissection but that of the hard reality. As Camus, Sofa felt it was necessary to present the truth in its most bare and natural state.

On the last page of *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux reminds us that plague bacillus never really dies: it lurks for years in furniture and linens, awaiting the day it might once more rouse the rats of a happy city to bring a message of death. Similarly, through his literature Ahmed Sofa warned us. He continually pointed out the germs of fascism, bigotry, and sycophancy lurking in the crevices of our society. Whatever their differences in structure, both Camus and Sofa were indomitable architects of human existence, who, in the face of epic plagues, taught us to fight with common decency.

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POETRY

Beyond the pond

SHIBLEE SHAHED

I sat by the pond after a long hiatus.
Just then, a butterfly drifted away,
slightly touching the water's surface.
Like my transient youth,
a woodpecker took wing,
for it had to peck at wood
and drink its share of musky water.
A few ducks circled round and round,
in an attempt to create something
more sublime than the dictates of the food chain.
I turned to the child beside me.
"Look, there's no world beyond the pond."
The child laughed.
In its laughter live on
my ancestry,
my lineage.

Dr Shiblee Shahed *is a public health specialist, essayist, poet, and translator. His debut poetry collection was published in 2013 by Shuddhashar Publications. His poems and articles have appeared in numerous national and international outlets. He is a regular contributor to* The Daily Star.

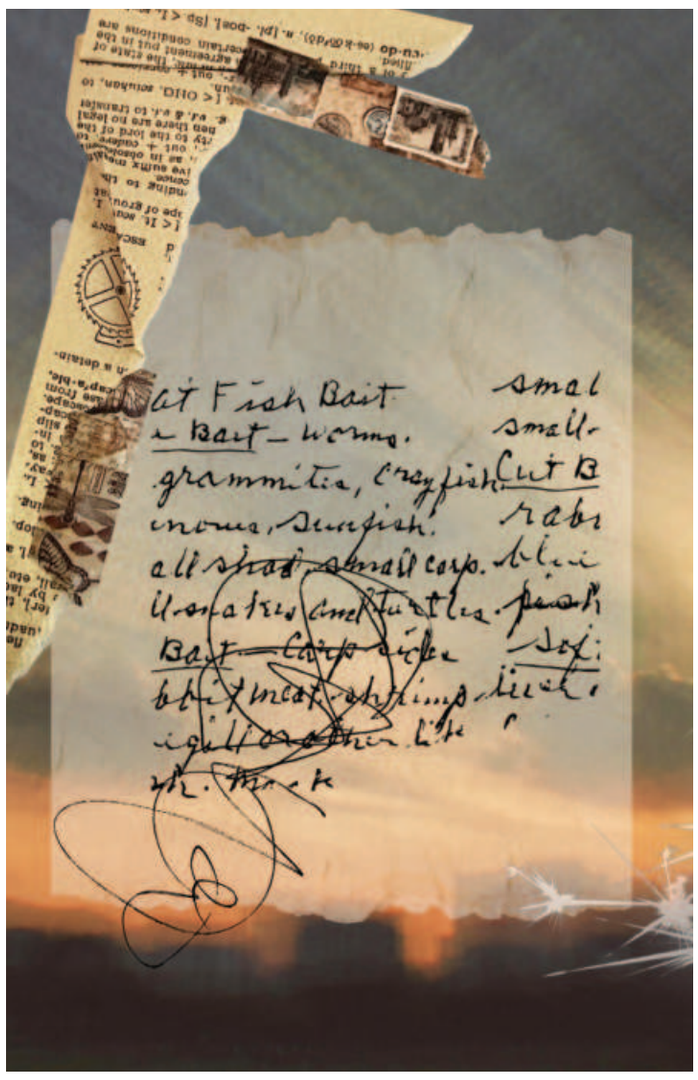


ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

POETRY

Rage

JARIN SUBAH

And one day—
When i pick my pen again,
All i have is rage
Scratched on pages
Lines cut like bleeding wounds being cut twice
The sort of rage where my eyes burn
into a silent pain,
gradually radiating to my lower jaw
I clench so deep that I fail to realise
there's a circular trace of teeth on my hand
Clear and red yet comforting in a way
my heart starts pounding to the physical pain
And my lungs?
Flaring for air; yet prefers to live without it
I could think of a thousand different ways to hurt myself
Just a visual representation of how love screwed up my mind
I have rage to the point
I could burn pages but not lives
I could complain to god but never let my prayers be the cause of your demise
I could wish for you to live with the burden of regrets; alive but dead inside
And when memories rewind,
I fuel my rage with the poems I write

Jarin Subah *is a third year medical student using poetry as escapism.*



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

POETRY

Three haiku

QUAMRUL HASSAN

first kiss
she covers his eyes
with her palm
first rain
she makes the divorce letter
a paper boat
full moon
grandma sings
grandpa's favorite song
summer date
all over her dress
sunflowers
her little request—
a sip from mom's
cup of tea

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