

# A Study on Empire Consciousness in *The Plague*

Li Qingya and Zang Xiaojia

**Abstract**—*The Plague* written by Camus tells the story of fighting against the plague. The anti-epidemic organizations gathered around the hero, Dr. Rieux struggle against the plague during the closure of Oran. Throughout the story, whether it's the process from the occurrence of plague to the real confirmation, or the process of the anti-epidemic teams being organized, the indigenous inhabitants of Oran City—the Arabs are all marginalized objects and silent “others”. In addition, the Arab lands are full of French-style life and management methods, and Spanish-style building. These are the revelation of Camus's deep-rooted imperial consciousness.

**Index Terms**—Camus, *The Plague*, imperial consciousness.

## I. INTRODUCTION

*The Plague* [1] tells of the plague in Oran, Algeria, and the sudden plague makes people feel at a loss. Politicians are arrogant and ignorant, concealing their faults, and even want to use disasters to gain benefits; the small potato who used to live a depressed life, relying on the black market to bring all kinds of forbidden goods to the people, suddenly become the man of the hour of the city; the ordinary people are panicked and helpless, selfish and greedy, just living a decadent life every day. The city is heavily blocked because of the plague, and no one is able to enter and leave freely. The people trapped in the city are thinking about their relatives and friends who live outside the city. A reporter who went to the city on business was forced to live a life without relatives and friends, only hoping to participate in the voluntary team to kill time. At this time, the hero, Dr. Rieux, stepped forward to rescue the patients and became close friends with some of his colleagues. However, his wife is far away in the nursing home, life and death uncertain. In the end, the plague retreated inexplicably. However, despite the uproarious gongs and drums diluting people's fear of disease, the people of Oran will never forget the nightmare that the plague brought to them.

The author of *The Plague* is Albert Camus (1913-1960) who is French writer, philosopher, representative of existential literature and absurd philosophy. His main works include *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, etc.. The absurd philosophy pursued in his works is well-known around the world, and with dual identity characteristics and irreconcilable contradictions, he also explores and seeks his own path of salvation under the influence of poverty memory and Mediterranean culture—to resist with literature. Therefore, most of the research on Camus focuses on existentialism, absurd consciousness, resistance to philosophy, absurd

aesthetics, evolution of philosophical thoughts and other perspectives related to absurdity, existence, and resistance. In 1957, the Swedish Academy awarded Camus the Nobel Prize in Literature “for his important literary production, which with clear-sighted earnestness illuminates the problems of the human conscience in our times” [2]. Camus's humanitarian stance is unquestionable, therefore, little research on Camus and his works involves his imperial consciousness, but this consensus can obscure the imperial consciousness in his works.

In the study of a writer, in addition to his works, it is always difficult to bypass his living environment and cultural background. Therefore, we need to have a clear understanding of Camus's growth experience. Albert Camus [2] was born in Mondovi, Algeria, on November 7, 1913. After Camus' father died as a soldier in World War I in 1914, he moved with his mother to his grandmother's house in the slum area of Algiers, so he spent a very difficult teenage and youth life. However, his literary talent was not extinguished by the hard life, but quickly revealed. Since 1937, Camus has published works one after another, and became famous because of *The Stranger*.

Albert Camus, who was born and raised in French Algeria, was brought up completely in the French way. Although he can write a famous report on the sufferings brought by colonialism to the colony - a series of reports about the Kabylia Mountains [2], however, as a conqueror of Algerian land since 1830, Camus, a Frenchman, has a tendency of racial narcissism in his subconscious mind. He thinks that he is more excellent and noble than the Arab natives, and the French and other European white talents are the real master of Algeria. The story of *The Plague* takes place in Oran, Algeria, where the Arabs are indigenous. However, in the book, Camus' description of Arab elements is very few, and the Arabs are just a silent background. In the whole story, whether it's the process from the occurrence of plague to the real confirmation, or the process of the anti-epidemic teams being organized, the indigenous inhabitants of Oran City—the Arabs are all marginalized objects and silent “others”. In addition, the Arab lands are full of French-style life and management methods, and Spanish-style building. These are the revelation of Camus's deep-rooted imperial consciousness. “others”. This is the revelation of Camus's deep-rooted imperial consciousness.

## II. SPANISH ELEMENTS THE SYMBOL OF THE “GLORIOUS ACHIEVEMENTS” OF THE FRENCH EMPIRE

Before the 1980s, Spain was a country that immigrated to Latin America, neighboring European countries (mainly France) and North Africa (mainly Algeria). The Spanish immigration to Algeria began in the early period of the

Manuscript received October 28, 2021; revised December 28, 2021.

Li Qingya and Zang Xiaojia are with School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University (NPU), XI'AN, CO 710129 China (e-mail: 528996213@qq.com, 528996213@qq.com).

French conquest of Algeria and lasted for more than a century, reaching the last climax of immigration after the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939 [3]. Because the coast of Morocco, the closest to the Spanish territory, was under the control of the Franco Group, the Spaniards who left because of the defeat of the Republican government chose to cross the Algerian coastline, that is, the coastline of Oran Province and the west coastline of Algiers to Algeria. According to the estimation of the Algerian viceroy's office [3], in only two months from March 31, 1939 to June 10, 1939, there were 200 Spaniards who had entered Algeria, and there were two settlements in Oran province to receive them. The life footprints of several generations of Spaniards in Oran for more than a century have left many Spanish style buildings in today's Oran City, such as the famous Santa Cruz castle at the highest point of Oran city and the Spanish viceroy's house.

*The Plague* took place in Oran City, the capital of Oran province. There are many Spanish traces in the book: the Spanish old man who has the characteristics of a prophet and escaped the plague, and Jean Tarrou who participated in the Spanish Civil War, a large number of Spanish dancers and musicians with whom Jean Tarrou interacted, Spanish restaurants repeatedly appeared, Spanish style cottages on the side of the mountain, French with Spanish accent, football player Gonzalez who wanted to help Raymond Rambert sneak out of Oran and later joined the anti-epidemic organization, and others. The Spaniards followed the pace of colonial expansion of the French Empire to Algeria, and French Algeria became the preferred haven for the defeated party in the Spanish Civil War after fleeing Spain. According to the French edition of Camus' Biography [4], except for Latin, Camus had no difficulty in learning French, history, geography and other subjects in middle school, and he was rewarded for his history lessons in college. It can be seen that Camus understood this history and used Chun-Qiu Writing Method to describe it in *The Plague*. The ubiquitous Spanish elements in *The Plague* are the witnesses to the colonial expansion of the French Empire, the symbol of the "glorious achievements" of the French Empire, and also the inadvertent revelation of Camus's imperial consciousness.

### III. "SUBALTERN" ACCEPTING FRENCH CULTURAL LEADERSHIP AND POLITICAL RULE

Gramsci Antonio (1891-1937) coined the term "subaltern" in *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (1975) [5] to identify the cultural hegemony that excludes and displaces specific people and social groups from the socio-economic institutions of society, in order to deny their agency and voices in colonial politics. In *Geographies of Post colonialism* (2008) [6], Sharp, J. P. pointed out that the Western intellectuals transferred the non-Western form of "knowing" to the margin of intellectual discourse by reconstructing and thus intellectually diminishing, such forms of acquiring knowledge as myth and folklore. To be heard and to be known, the subaltern class must adopt Western ways of knowing (language, thought, reasoning) [7]. For this reason, the subalterns can never express their native ways of knowing, but must consistent their local knowledge with the Western, colonial ways of knowing. Only by

speaking the language of suzerain state, the subordinate classes could be heard by the colonists. She gave an example. In Colonial Latin America, the subordinated natives followed the colonial culture, and if they wanted to have an effective appeal to the Spanish Crown, they would address the rulers in a way that conformed to the Spanish way and abandoned their own, native ways of speaking. Under the long-term influence of the cultural ideology of the master country, the subordinate classes gradually absorbed the suzerain's culture and recognized its political leadership.

The process of Frenchization of Algeria continued from the French occupation of the coastal areas of Algeria in 1830 and the exile of the Viceroy Hussein to the French occupation of all of Algeria in 1905. "First, the land taken from the natives and their buildings were occupied; then French settlers gained control of the cork oak forests and mineral deposits. "Aborigines were driven out and Europeans, such as the French, moved in [8]. Olivier Todd wrote in the biography of Camus that the school teachers would repeatedly emphasize to the students the idea that France was the the motherland; the French, whether they were academicians of the French Academy, or ordinary people, generally believed that the Muslim aborigines could realize their human nature after they become French, and the progressives among the wise of Muslim indigenous people once believed that the wound has been healed in 100 years. It can be said that the French cultural ideology expanded wantonly in Algeria and penetrated into all aspects of the lives of the colonized people. Even Algeria realized this after its independence and chose to accept it calmly. Therefore, today, French is still an important common language in Algeria. We can also see that the mosque is accompanied by the Catholic Church, and many Algerians also have French citizenship and work in France. In *The Plague*, we also see a completely French city of Oran, where people and life have a strong French brand. The surname of the hero Dr. Rieux is an old French surname and also the name of several French towns; Michel, the old porter, is a very typical and common French name; Joseph Grand, the hero in Rieux 's eyes, his Joseph is from the Bible and Grand from ancient French, etc. There is no Arabic-style name in the book. In addition, trams are used to travel; churches and bathing beaches are competitors; people drink publicly in pubs, restaurants and cafes; Father Paneloux preaches twice with many listeners; before the plague, people celebrate Christmas and All Saints' Day, and funeral services are provided by churches; after the plague, the city residents spread the prophecy of Catholic Saints; "Christians" "Priest" "Catholic Church" and "Believer" appeared many times. It can be said that *The Plague* is full of French elements. We can't see a trace of the Arab world. It seems that Oran is a city in France. The subaltern class- the local Arabs, not only accepted the political rule of France, but also accepted its cultural leadership.

### IV. SILENT ARAB NATIVES

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) said in *Madness and Civilization* [9] that only those who master discourse have the right to speak. The reason why a lunatic is expelled from reason is because of the absence and silence of madness. The

right to speak is a right of oppression and rejection. When someone can speak, it means that his opponent has been suppressed and restricted, and he has become a silent “other” [10]. In *The Plague* we see that although the story is set in Oran, Algeria, the word “Arabs” only appears three times in the novel: “He was doing an investigation for a large Parisian newspaper about the living conditions of the Arabs” “It involved a young company employee who had killed an Arab on a beach” “I was asking you for information about the condition of the Arabs”. In addition, there are two pronouns that refer to Arabs: “He.....and wanted information about their state of health” “Rieux told him that their health was not good”. There are only five very simple Arab factors in this novel with an Arab city as the background. In sharp contrast, the French elements permeated throughout the novel as I mentioned above. Not only that, after the plague raged, countless Arab natives died silently, and the author Camus just mentioned it in one stroke. It can be said that the sense of despair created by Camus during the closure of Oran was not to show the sorrow of the death of the Arabs, but to express the resistance and struggle consciousness of the French or Europeans represented by Dr. Rieux. The positions of Europeans and indigenous Arabs in the novel are extremely unequal. In this “right-discourse” oppositional structure, the Arabs Aborigines have no right to speak. They can only remain silent and speak in the imagination of the European masters, and they are turned into a mysterious, barbaric, backward image. Even Lacheraf noted in *L’Algerie* (Algeria) that “les Arabes ne comprennent que la force brutale.” (Arabs only understand brute force)

Said wrote in *Culture and Imperialism* [11] that “So while ‘France reproduced itself in Algeria’, Algerians were relegated to marginality and poverty”. Camus once publicly stated: “As far as Algeria is concerned, national independence is a formula driven by nothing other than passion. There has never yet been an Algerian nation..... Moreover, a purely Arab Algeria could not achieve that economic independence without which political independence is nothing but an illusion. However inadequate the French effort has been, it is of such proportions that no other country would today agree to take over the responsibility”. Here we can see Said’s theory of Orientalism. The East is just a fiction and imagination. The Arab world of the East is nothing but the collective imagination of Westerners who regard the East as a regional space to be developed, cultivated and protected”. Camus therefore thinks that the French colonial career in Algeria is worth saving and extending. Although he was born and raised in Algeria, and has seen the miserable life of the colonial people, because of his racial narcissism and French education, Camus, a Frenchman, was in the colony but his heart was French. The Arabs in Algeria were of no importance to him. The French and other European talents were the masters of Algeria, and the indigenous Arabs could only be represented and spoken. They cannot speak, and can only be a silent background.

## V. THE PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In the early 2020, COVID-19 [12] raged around the world, and it has not yet been effectively controlled globally. The new type of coronavirus is a new strain of coronavirus that

has never been found in the human body before. After infection, people will have symptoms such as fever, cough, and difficulty breathing. In severe cases, they can cause pneumonia, kidney failure, and even death. It can spread among people. The means of transmission include direct transmission, aerosol transmission, contact transmission and other methods. At the beginning of the epidemic, under the advice of academicians and other professionals, China took measures to curb the spread of the virus, such as appealing to the public to wear masks, and reducing unnecessary going out. However, the American mainstream media “New York Times”, which has won 112 Pulitzer Prizes, issued an article on March 8, 2020, accusing China of imposing a blockade on approximately 60 million people and strict quarantine and travel restrictions on hundreds of millions of people in order to fight against COVID-19. According to New York Times, these measures have brought huge losses to personal freedom and undermined “human rights”. However, only twenty minutes later, the “New York Times” published an article praising Italy’s lockdown measures for protecting the entire Europe at the expense of its own economy. Arrogance and double standards are the manifestation of today’s imperial consciousness.

Some scholars believe that imperial consciousness [7] is a strong narcissistic complex held by imperialist countries towards their own political, economic, cultural, religious, historical traditions and other elements. Under the influence of the imperial consciousness, “Westerners firmly believe that without the support and leadership of Westerners, there is simply no life, history, or culture in the remote areas of this world, and there is no independence or integrity at all... If there is anything to write about in those places, it is just a decadent, depraved, and hopeless reality.” [13] Said wrote in *Culture and Imperialism* that the United States’ leadership and particularism have always existed, and the United States likes to interpret what he did as “responsibility to the world”; it is almost heresy to describe the nation as an empire in the United States, but George Washington characterized the country as an empire, with a subsequent foreign policy that abandoned the revolution and promoted the growth of the empire. [11]

Therefore, when the world’s police and superpower - the United States and some countries that hold “Eurocentrism”, saw that China, the former “other” [14] and the subordinate class, effectively suppress the spread of COVID-19 within two months, while the COVID-19 in their countries was not effectively contained, its inherent perception that the West is synonymous with advanced, civilized, and developed, while the East is a symbol of barbarism and backwardness is broken. It is difficult for the United States and these countries to accept this reality, so they discredited China on different occasions, accused China of falsifying data, etc., in an attempt to shirk their responsibility for inaction and negligence.

In the face of the COVID-19, the global pandemic, the measures taken and the international attitude shown by Western countries are precisely the expression of their deep-rooted imperial consciousness.

## VI. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the Spanish elements, as the witness of the colonial expansion and “glorious achievements” of the French Empire, runs through *The Plague*. As the colonized

people, the Arab indigenous people, though living a French-style life and accepting French cultural leadership and political rule, have no name but to die in silence, which is only shown in the indifferent statistics of the death toll. They can not speak out, have no right to speak, and can only be expressed, watched and ruled. Camus' inherent imperial consciousness is revealed in this invisible contrast.

To this day, the consciousness of empire is still deeply ingrained in the understanding of Western countries. Once they see that this cognition is broken, Western countries will try their best to conceal the truth in order to maintain their inherent "civilized and developed" empire image.

However, just as Algeria finally defeated the French colonial rule and gained national liberation and national independence, the imperial image of some Western countries will eventually cease to exist, and the imperial consciousness will eventually be submerged in the harmonious development of a community with a shared future for mankind.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Li Qingya makes the main contribution to this paper. She conducted this work and wrote the article; Zang Xiaojia helped to revise and perfect the paper. All authors had approved the final version.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to take advantage of this occasion to acknowledge my indebtedness to my supervisor, who is also the second author of this paper, Prof. Zang Xiaojia. In my postgraduate studies, my supervisor, Prof. Zang has given me a lot of help in my research direction, determination of the thesis topic, study research and so on. Whenever I need to collect literature, research in other places, and attend conferences to learn, Prof. Zang will give me active support in all aspects at the first time, so that I have no worries. In addition, Prof. Zang also introduced me to a number of domestic French literature experts to help me broaden my horizons, master cutting-edge ideas, and blend in the French literature world. Finally, the formation of this paper is inseparable from the careful revision and pertinent opinions of the supervisor.

Sponsoring information: Sponsored by the Seed Foundation of Innovation and Creation for Graduate Students in the Northwestern Polytechnical University (CX2020279).

#### REFERENCES

- [1] A. Camus, *The Plague*, Robin Buss: London: Penguin Classics, 2013.
- [2] H.-R. Lottman, *Camus*, Y. S. Xiao, L. M. Chen, and P. X. Qian, Eds. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2018.

- [3] K. Kateb, "Les immigrés espagnols dans les camps en Algérie (1939-1941)," *Annales de Démographie Historique*, 2007.
- [4] O. Todd, *Albert Camus Une Vie*, X. Y. Huang, L. He, and M. Gong, Eds. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2010, pp. 44-56.
- [5] A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, L. Y. Cao, L. Jiang, and X. Zhang, Eds. Zhengzhou: Henan University Press, 2014, pp. 54-63.
- [6] J. P. Sharp, *Geographies of Post-Colonialism*, London: Sage, 2008.
- [7] Y. Yang and J. Yang, "A study on the concept and value of 'subaltern' in the field of Gramsci's cultural power theory," *Southeast Academic Research*, vol. 2, pp. 181-186, March 2014.
- [8] E. W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: A Division of Random House, Inc. 1994, ch. 2, p. 171.
- [9] M. Foucault, *Histoire de La Folie à l'âge Classique*, B. C. Liu and Y. Y. Yang, Eds. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2016, pp. 85-111.
- [10] E. W. Said, *Orientalism*, Y. G. Wang, Eds. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2016, pp. 140-165.
- [11] E. W. Said. (2016). *Culture and Imperialism*. K. Li, Eds. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company. [Online]. pp. 240-264. Available: <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%96%B0%E5%9E%8B%E5%86%A0%E7%8A%B6%E7%97%85%E6%AF%92%E8%82%BA%E7%82%8E/24282529?fr=aladdin>
- [12] L. Y. Mao, "On Moby Dick: The isostructural building of national image and imperial ideology," *Foreign Literature*, vol 3, pp. 94-102, August 2017.
- [13] T. Q. Hu, "The double construction of the 'other' in the postcolonial context," *Journal of Xiangtan Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, vol. 26, pp. 12-14, Sept. 2004.
- [14] H. M. Tang, *Race Gender and Identity*, Beijing: The Ethnic Publishing House, 2006.

Copyright © 2022 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).



**Li Qingya** was born in Henan Province, China in October 1990, graduated from Sichuan University, Chengdu, China in June 2014 with a bachelor of arts degree. She worked as a French translator in Algeria from August 2014 to January 2019. In September 2019, she entered Northwestern Polytechnical University (NPU), Xi'an, China to study for a master's degree in of foreign linguistics and applied linguistics.



**Zang Xiaojia** (PhD, Nanjing University) is an associate professor and associate dean of School of Foreign Studies of Northwestern Polytechnical University in China. She was also a visiting scholar to Paris-Sorbonne University in France, attended summer program at Michigan State University in America, and a recipient of two China's National Funds of Social Sciences as well as Young Scholar's Research Grant of the Chinese Education Ministry. Specializing in comparative and transnational studies

of literature and cultures, philosophy, art and film, she is the author of *The Naissance of the Canon: In search of Lost Time* (Foreign Languages Press, Beijing) and *The Art and the Days: Proust with Arts and Philosophy* (Science Press, Beijing) as well as more than a dozen articles published in academic journals.