

# Theme of pandemics in literature: From *The Plague* by Albert Camus to Vietnamese novels in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century

Nguyen Thuy Trang\*

Hue University of Education, 34 Le Loi Street, Phu Hoi Ward, Hue City, Thua Thien Hue Province, Vietnam

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## **Abstract:**

Since ancient times, humanity has experienced many horrifying pandemics. The anxiety about the casualties, death, and suffering of the pandemics has been boldly imprinted and reflected in literature. From 1947, Albert Camus's warnings in the novel *The Plague* and the novel still have practical significance today. His prophetic insight into the absurd world of humanity has come to fruition as we face the dangerous global COVID-19 pandemic. In recent years, theme of pandemics has received more attention from writers. Some novels published in Vietnam, such as *Quarantine Days* (B.Q. Thang), *Nalis Drifted to The Shore of Destiny* (T. Ha), and *Sadness is Sowing The Seeds of Kindness* (I. Le), all share the same theme of a pandemic. It shows the agility and timeliness of literature in the face of life's radiation. The article provides a comparative view of A. Camus's *The Plague* with some Vietnamese novels of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Connecting the topic of pandemics from traditional to modern, the article focuses on pointing out the exciting and unique points between this east-west literary intersection. The pandemics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Camus's *The Plague* and the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Vietnamese novels have exciting implications.

**Keywords:** Albert Camus, COVID-19, pandemic, *The Plague*, Vietnamese novels.

**Classification number:** 9.2

## **1. Introduction**

Birth, aging, sickness, and death is the basic law of nature. The human life cycle must go through the formation, growth, illness, aging, and death process. It is an inescapable process; but, faced with the pain and loss of pandemics, humanity is still shocked, haunted, and saddened. Since the advent of writing, human history has recorded countless pandemics that have taken countless lives, destroyed the economy, disrupted daily life, and caused mental despair and loss of faith.

We can mention some horrifying pandemics from ancient times to modern times, such as the plague in Athens that took place from 430 to 426 BC and took away a quarter of the Athenian army and population. From 165 to 180 AD, about 5,000 Romans died every day from the Antonine Plague, the origin of which scientists believe was a smallpox virus brought from the Italian peninsula by soldiers returning from the Near East. The Justinian Plague (541-542) devastated the Byzantine Empire, affecting a large territory stretching from the Middle East

to Western Europe. It is estimated that this pandemic killed about 50 million people (accounting for half of the world's population at that time). The plague called the "Black Death" killed about 75 to 200 million people across Europe and Asia during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, peaking in 1346-1351. The smallpox pandemic that appeared in America in the 17<sup>th</sup> century caused about 20 million deaths, accounting for 90% of the continent's population at the time. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was an influenza pandemic in 1889-1890 that spread worldwide, killing about 1 million people. The Spanish flu pandemic (1918-1920) killed more than 50 million people in the twentieth century. The HIV pandemic - the virus that causes AIDS - began in 1969, with an infection rate of about 25% in southern and eastern Africa, then spread across the globe, leaving many tragic aftershocks to this day. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, pandemics such as SARS (2002-2003), influenza A H1N1 pandemic (2009), Ebola pandemic (2014) have seriously threatened human lives [1]. Recently, for three years (2019-2022), the COVID-19 pandemic has been causing suffering and loss, to humanity.

\*Email: nguyenthuytrang@hueuni.edu.vn

Anxiety about the casualties, death, and suffering of the pandemics have been boldly imprinted and reflected in literature. Many works have taken pandemics as inspiration or artistic intention to convey a meaningful human message. For example the novel *Decameron* (1353) by G. Boccaccio; novel *A Journal of The Plague Year* (1722) by D. Foe; novel *The Last Man* (1826) by M. Shelley; the short story *The Mask of The Red Death* (1842) by A.E. Poe; novel *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) by J. London; novel *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939) by K.A. Porter; novel *The Plague* (1947) by A. Camus; novel *Love in The Time of Cholera* (1985) by G.G. Marquez; novel *Blindness* (1995) by J. Saramago; novel *Plague Journal* (1999) by M.D. O'Brien; novel *Dream of Ding Village* (2005) by Y. Lian-ke; novel *Zone One* (2011) by C. Whitehead; novel *Red Ashes* (2017) by P.H. Young; novel *The Dreamers* (2019) by K. Thomas; novel *28* (2020) by J.Y. Jeong...

In Vietnam, the theme of pandemics appears in literature; some works reflect the social panoramic view of the "COVID period" such as the novel *Quarantine Days* by B.Q. Thang; the long story *Human Love during The Quarantine Period* by T.N. Thach; novel *Sadness is Sowing The Seeds of Kindness - Diary of A Nurse during COVID-19* by I. Le; novel *Nalis Drifted to The Shore of Destiny* by T. Ha; novel *Immersed in The Virus Swarm* by N.V. Hoc; the long story *Going Through Two Pandemic Seasons* by D. Khoa; the autobiography *55 Days of Detention in Paris - Diary Was Written from The Center of The Pandemic* by G. Huong; the short stories *Memoir Paris+14* by C.T. Huong; the collection of essays *Saigon Remembers The Love* of 25 authors; the short stories *I'm Here, Sister!* by B. Ngan; the short stories *Letter of COVID Season* by N.T. Cu; the short stories *In The Silence of The City* by T.T.T. Ngoc; the short stories *COVID-Era Classroom* by P.T. Mui; the short stories *Believe in The Return Date* by B.V. Phuong...

In recent years, the appearance of many works on the theme of pandemics in the world and Vietnam has shown the agility and timeliness of literature in the face of life's "radiation." From here, scholars laid the theoretical foundation for the epidemic/pandemic literature line, including basic concepts and characteristics. According to L.G. More (2021) [2]: Literature of pandemics exhibits commonality of humanistic concerns; to explore the meaning of painful experiences through reading, reflection and storytelling, shaping our experiences

of health, disease, and illness and providing us with insights into how our ancestors internalized pain and anguish from pandemics. Pandemic literature has always proved to be a window on societies inflicted with plagues and pestilences, thereby offering a close picture of semblances and differences, from minor to major, from social, political, health-related, and economic problems encountered by them.

That can be considered a comprehensive definition of epidemic/pandemic literature. The core ideas and themes of this line of literature address broad issues that cover the condition and life of humans. That means it does not stop at the story of an individual but focuses on the life of the community and race. The artistic techniques of pandemic literature are typically demonstrated through the construction of pandemic images (images of viruses, types of parasites) and motifs (quarantine motifs, heroes, etc.). The content of works about pandemics all have striking similarities in describing people's reactions when the disease spreads, concerns about the virus's origin, inadequacies in society, and ways to deal with pandemics and cope in difficult and dangerous situations. Therefore, studying pandemic literature is an interdisciplinary research direction, approaching literature from the perspective of relationships with broad fields such as biology, anthropology, epidemiology, environment, ecology, culture.

Connecting the topic of pandemics from tradition to modernity, this article focuses on illuminating A. Camus's novel *The Plague* with some Vietnamese novels of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Specifically, the scope of research focuses on three novels: *Quarantine Days* (2020) by B.Q. Thang, *Sadness is Sowing The Seeds of Kindness - Diary of a Nurse During COVID-19* (2020) by I. Le; *Nalis Drifted to The Shore of Destiny* (2021) by T. Ha. These are typical novels deeply reflecting the reality and fate of people during the pandemic period. Furthermore, these novels were composed during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022. From a comparative perspective, the author finds many interesting and unique points between this east-west interference. Because pandemics are not simply a social disease that spreads quickly and affects health and mind; deeply, the pandemic will reveal people's politics, culture, lifestyle, and behavior towards the world around them. The pandemics of the twentieth century in Camus's *The Plague* and the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Vietnamese novels have exciting implications.

## 2. The theme of pandemics and the French-Vietnamese literary reunion

### 2.1. Cause and effect relationship between pandemics, war, and ecological environment

Works about pandemics are always similar in tracing the origin of pandemics. There are many factors considered to be the origin and spread of pandemics. In particular, researchers pay special attention to the issue of war and the ecological environment. Moreover, these factors are closely related to each other. It was also J. Diamon's important argument in the work *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997) [3] when he analyzed the defeat of a powerful Cajamarca empire in the Americas before the Spanish army; it was not due to the powerful war horses, the steel weapons, the muskets; but by bacteria. Diseases from invading people, who already carried significant antibodies, infect people without antibodies. Smallpox, measles, influenza, typhus, bubonic plague, and other infectious diseases in Europe played a decisive role in the European conquests, killing many people on the continents [3].

Pathogens brought by European colonists (measles, influenza, smallpox, typhus, plague, cholera...) became a terrifying "biological weapon", causing indigenous peoples to perish. Everywhere in the Americas, European-introduced diseases spread from tribe to tribe long before Europeans arrived, killing about 95% of the pre-Columbian native American population. A smallpox epidemic in 1714 was the single and biggest step for European migrants to exterminate the indigenous San people in South Africa completely [3].

Whether we like it or not, these infectious diseases accidentally became a means of "paving the way" for European expansion worldwide for a long time. Through telling about pandemics, some writers aim to express conflicts in society and views on war. Therefore, literature about pandemics does not simply describe pandemics. Still, it also projects profound issues related to the conflict between the center and the periphery, colonizers and colonized, hegemony and ecocentrism. For example, G. Márquez's novel *Love in The Time of Cholera* can be understood as an allegory of how European colonialists imposed rule and exterminated Indian tribes partly because of disease. P.T. Anh (2022) [4] believed that, "Cholera has become a cultural symbol of colonial and post-colonial nature in Latin America... The feeling is traumatic to the spirit of the race".

As for *The Plague*, A. Camus (2002) [5] wrote the work during his anti-fascist years and was a direct participant. At this time, when people were still happy after the end of the war and joyfully sang the slogan "Never again", Camus still warned us that the next plague would "awaken its rats once again" in exchange for "the breakdown and awakening of humanity". Furthermore, the writer is well aware of the complexity of the African cholera pandemic in Oran, Algeria (1849) - the place mentioned in the novel - and other pandemics in his home village of Mondovi. Many researchers identify the Plague as "an allegory alluding to the Nazi occupation of France". The central character of the novel *The Plague* - doctor Rieux - was built with the personality, actions, and thoughts of a human resistance fighter. It was a fight against crime, against terrorism, against death for the happiness and peaceful life of people. Through the confession Tarrou shared with Rieux, the character confided: "I think the society I live in is a society based on the death penalty, and by opposing that society, I oppose murder" [5]. Oran was attacked and blockaded, similar to how other historical cities were invaded and sacked. Many times, in thinking about the pandemics, Dr. Rieux had thoughts about the event of the allied army attacking Athens, accidentally bringing the disease with them. The outbreak of war and food shortages made Athens vulnerable to disease, famine, and war. That was similar to the picture of Oran in reality. The writer A. Camus believed: "In the world, there are as many plagues as there are wars. But people are always surprised in the face of plague and war" [5]. With a deep look into the past, Camus once again evoked ancient vestiges to remind us of the pain of war and pandemics:

There is no denying the images of ancient disasters: Athens stricken with plague and deserted of birds, Chinese cities filled with silent dying people, hardworking prisoners in Marseille piled up with dying corpses, leaking water into the pit, the great wall built in Provence to keep out the fierce plague wind, Jaffa with its hideous beggars, the damp and rotten beds low against the rammed earth floor in Constantine's hospital, the Sick people being dragged away by hooks, teams of doctors, wearing masks during the Black Plague, intercourse of the living in the Milan cemetery, carts carrying corpses in the city of London, and the days and nights echo, everywhere, at all times, the endless cries of people [5].

The history of interactions between different peoples is what shaped the modern world through conquest, infectious disease, and genocide. Those conflicts created long-term effects that, after many centuries, have not stopped impacting and are still ongoing in some regions of the world. Looking at novels about pandemics in Vietnam in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, although they do not directly mention war like Camus's *The Plague*, the writers also implicitly express the conflicts between humans and humans, humans and nature are some of the challenges that cause pandemics. T. Ha (2021) [6] says, "The truth of peace between humans and nature and other viruses. God's game began when humanity was greedy and no longer wanted to live peacefully with nature. People who love weapons and war are unhappy". Therefore, Vietnamese writers perceive the fight against pandemics - as Camus did - as a war. The two novels B.Q. Thang's *Quarantine Days* and T. Ha's *Nalis Rushing to The Shore of Destiny* share the same theme of soldiers fighting the pandemic. The novel *Quarantine Days* highlights the strict, decisive, and humane response of the government and the armed forces in preventing the pandemic. The novel *Nalis Drifts to The Shore of Destiny* tells about the intense investigation process of High-Tech Police Department soldiers to track down traces of the virus via the internet. The narrative methods are different, but both novels imprint the silhouettes of police and military soldiers before the pandemic. They are important figures in the battlefield without gunpowder - the battlefield of the virus.

I. Le's novel *Sadness is Sowing The Seeds of Kindness - A Nurse's Diary During COVID-19* in 2020 shows the penetrating ideology: "Doctors and nurses are soldiers on the medical front". This is a remarkable novel in which a Vietnamese writer recounts the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. But because of that, I. Le points out conflicts about ethnicity, religion, and continents. The story is told by nurse Mia, who is of Asian descent. When the pandemic broke out in Australia, every time she encountered people in the subway, supermarkets, and convenience stores, she was threatened, assaulted, and insulted as if she were the cause of the pandemic. Faced with criticism - "You shouldn't spread the virus so much" - Mia was sad and wondered: "Do we sacrifice our health, accept to leave our families, just to be met with such legendary, distant, and terrifying attitudes?" [7]. People vented all their frustration about the suffering and death of the pandemic

because they thought that she and the "Wuhan virus" had the same origin. Here, the author shows that the pandemic has become a catalyst for people to develop racism and anti-Asian attitudes that are often seen in Western society.

In fact, pandemics are often an excuse for countries to go to war. In F.M. Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in 2000 [8], Raskolnikov's main character is dissatisfied and dreams that "the whole world condemned by a terrible new strange plague that has come to Europe with its roots in Asia". A dream that belongs to the unconscious but can serve as a basis for blaming and attributing responsibility to countries, governments, or state institutions for pandemics. From Jews in medieval Europe to merchants in Chinese wholesale markets, everyone has been considered the source of pandemics in human history. Deely, this story exploits social divisions in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, class, and even gender identity. Borrowing the point of view of the virus, T. Ha's novel *Nalis Drifting to The Shore of Destiny* affirms that the virus did not appear by chance and that humans have used the virus for selfish and brutal purposes: "They use us as a tool for battles that massacre their own kind. That is unacceptable" [6]. With this confession, the virus has suffered unjustly over the years because humans are truly the terrifying type of contagion.

Of course, blaming the people in Asia and Africa - areas that are considered peripheral, small countries, and inferior - is just aggression that creates conflict and domination. As analyzed, much evidence has confirmed that European countries are the source of the outbreak through war. However, at the same time, many researchers point out that environmental and ecological issues are also a significant cause of pandemics. In the work *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe* by A.W. Crosby (2004) [9], the author argues that the expansion, displacement, and replacement of indigenous people for the Europeans of the world's temperate regions (including North America, Australia, and New Zealand) was a matter of biology rather than military conquest. European organisms have certain decisive advantages over their Australasian and other regional counterparts. An increase in population accompanied the spread of diseases, European flora, and fauna. As a result, these empires became the owners of the most important agricultural lands in the world. So, the history of global development goes hand in hand with European ecological expansion.

Returning to history, since humans expanded their territory, moving towards rich deltas along large river basins, humans have created a unique civilization and a dense population distribution. Accordingly, the disease has germinated and spread. High population density also increases the possibility of widespread infection. Traces of pandemics were known very early through the epics of the Sumerians in Mesopotamia, the Vedas in India, and the bones of the Yellow River and Yangtze River (China). Agricultural societies not only contributed to population growth but also increased livestock numbers. The livestock ecosystem harbors pathogens that can be transmitted to humans and vice versa, and they also suffer the same fate as humans. In addition, trade development, trade relationships, exchange of goods, and conflicts and wars between countries and continents make the epidemic go faster. From here, a circle linking disease, war, and ecological crisis is formed and highlighted over time.

Although he did not directly state that the ecological environment was the cause of the plague outbreak, through recreating space, Camus reflected the reality of natural aridity and the rugged and stuffy modern urban landscape. At the beginning of the work, Oran is envisioned as “an ugly city,”: A city without pigeons, trees, gardens, a city without the sound of birds flapping their wings or the rustling of leaves [...]. The sun scorched dry houses in summer and covered the walls with grey ash. People could only live in the shade of closed doors at that time. On the contrary, autumn is filled with mud [5]. With many expectations of people to conquer nature, Oran has become a place that endures a harsh climate, scorching winds, and hot sun. The city landscape is concreted, boring, lacking trees and animals. The space exudes the commercialization of bills, discounts, purchases, vehicles, services... When the plague happened, the people here never thought: “this small city could be a particularly favorable place for mouse relatives to die under the sun and for gatekeepers to perish from strange diseases” [5]. The separation from nature and unsustainable industrialization has caused the Earth to warm up, giving rise to strange diseases that spread rapidly. It also made living insecure and fearful and left the dying “trapped behind hundreds of burning hot walls”. Camus calls it “modern death, coming from a dry land” [5].

Contemporary Vietnamese novels, on the contrary, directly highlight the impact of the environment on the existence of viruses in the community. The quarantine space in B.Q. Thang’s *Quarantine Days* is easily reminiscent of the city of Oran in Camus’s *The Plague*. As the people lined up to be tested, the spring sun was as hot as summer, “making the atmosphere hot and stuffy... The skewed sun cast their shadows to one side on the cement floor, forming another long row of strange shapes” [10]. Writer T. Ha also has feelings about the unusual climate: Autumn in Hanoi brings with it the sweltering heat of late summer. Sometimes, it’s sultry, like a warning sign for a sudden shower. It’s been long since we’ve seen the gentle breezes carrying the scent of milk flowers. Over the past ten years, the Earth has become increasingly hotter [...]. Year after year, summer temperatures each year break the previous year’s record [6].

It is no coincidence that when writing about pandemics, authors tend to describe nature as harsh, unpleasant, and hot and humid. Recent studies have analyzed that any disease’s existence, transformation, distribution, and transmission depends on specific environmental conditions. The Earth’s ozone layer is punctured, causing the greenhouse effect, climate change, and erratic weather. An increase in temperature and humidity can be considered a stimulus for the living environment of infectious viruses [11-14]. Obviously, this will represent the relationship between disease and the environment in different ways in literary texts. Strong and straightforward, T. Ha’s *Nalis Drifted to The Shore of Destiny* in 2021 [6], focusing on explaining the reason for the Nalis pandemic and its mutations stemming from the careless and irresponsible behavior and attitude of humans towards nature. The writer goes back to the past, proving that bacteria inherently existed before the homo sapiens. Gradually, humans developed, using their hands and brains to improve nature.

When people destroy forests, cut down trees, and hunt animals indiscriminately, the ecosystem gradually changes. Some animals go extinct. They become extinct not because of natural selection, but because of human selection [6].

The virus Nalis appearing in the novel is a message and warning to humanity. Mother Nature’s anger through pandemics is a terrible and causal punishment for

humans. "People are economically stagnant because of the pandemic. However, the amount of emissions that humans naturally emit has decreased by one-third. We are making people pay for what they have done and reclaiming the natural world that should exist" [6].

Through this narrative, Nalis drifted toward the shore of fate, like the cry for help from nature, the deep call of the jungle, and the painful voice of germs that humans cannot see with the naked eye. They exist around here, in the invisible air, and are suffering with humans from the pain of climate change, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, droughts. All works of literature, ultimately, are about people. Regarding the topic of pandemics, the writers have met to highlight and deepen the story of a pandemic that will always lurk and happen to all humanity as an implication that pandemics are an inevitable part of history. Because as long as humans are still destroying nature, invading and warring, pandemics still exist and persist.

## **2.2. The visualisation of society during quarantine and people's psychological reactions**

Each work on the theme of pandemics is like a dramatic social picture, a literary story full of reality. It also helps us have multi-dimensional visualizations and imaginations about life during quarantine and different types of human psychological reactions.

Presenting a world under blockade and confinement is the meeting point of works themed on pandemics. It is like a large prison, where people play the roles of prisoner, patient, victim, and murderer. Camus's novel *The Plague* begun on a hot day in early summer when the plague suddenly strikes Oran city. At first, when only a few rat corpses were lying on the stairs and in the middle of the street, Rieux and the residents thought this was mischief by children in the neighborhood. However, the number of dead mice was increasing, many people were infected, and the first deaths were reported. After tragic witnesses and fierce debates, the government had to admit the plague appeared and decided to blockade the city and isolate the entire society. Writer Camus painted a tableau of exile and isolation of humanity.

A numbing sadness enveloped Oran, a city built in a spiral shape on a plateau and only slightly facing the sea. Between the long exposed walls, on the streets with dusty glass display cases, on the dirty yellow train carriages, people feel more or less imprisoned by the sky [5].

Camus has provided readers with profound feelings about the bondage and oppression that humanity experienced. That stuffiness and cramped feeling spread throughout later novels. Entering B.Q. Thang's novel *Quarantine Days*, readers will recall the horrifying period of Vietnam in the early 2020s. That was the time when the pandemic broke out in many ways and forms, the COVID-19 virus entered Vietnam, causing the first cases of infection. The main space in the work is the quarantine area, so of course, it is a place far from the center, desolate, surrounded by the military. "The B40 iron fence is taller than a person's head around it. The only entrance also has a barrier, and there are always two guards controlling all objects and goods entering and leaving" [10].

All other living beings in the world still exist and operate freely; Only humans are imprisoned, no different from animals in a zoo. One year after the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hanoi capital, as described by writer T. Ha, is still gloomy. "The grey sky covered the whole city with heavy rain. The sound of water drops hitting the corrugated iron roof makes people feel heavy. The streets are now emptier than usual. Even though it was only six o'clock in the evening, there wasn't much traffic on the road" [6].

The ancient streets are sad with the heaviness of squalor, garbage, and death. "This dormitory is already old and shabby. The wall was painted yellow and was stained with moss, looking patchy" [6]. If you don't continue reading, readers can easily imagine this is a picture of the world's end. In fact, even though there is no mention of the end of the world, deaths permeate the texts. In Camus's novel *The Plague*, in just about ten months, the plague took the lives of many innocent people, disrupting life here and paralyzing economic development, tourism, and other industries. Each death statistic, each calendar marking the quarantine day, clearly noted by the writer, increased at dizzying levels. "In four days, the epidemic jumped four terrifying steps: sixteen people died, then twenty-four, twenty-eight, and thirty-two" [5]. "One hundred and twenty-four people died. The land is the total of the ninetieth day of the plague" [5]. Human life is measured from moments, not months or years. The number of people infected and dying from the virus in Nalis pushing the fateful shore of T. Ha also makes people afraid.

Every day the world wakes up, there are countless more people infected with new diseases. The number is increasing day by day. Every day, when people listen to the news, they see that this country and that country record a record number of patients with the disease. Records are broken every day and every hour that no one wants [6].

The pandemic does not exclude anyone. Camus's novel *The Plague* wrote that: "In the primacy of the plague, everyone, from the bishop to the worst prisoner, could die, and perhaps for the first time, there was absolute justice in the prison" [5]. Iris Le's novel *Sadness is Sowing The Seeds of Kindness* also describes, this virus may be unscrupulous and immoral, but it is fair. Everyone is at equal risk of infection, from the prime minister to a street sweeper, from a famous person to a destitute person or a movie star. The coronavirus does not spare anyone. It also does not limit any country, rich or poor. From West to East, from Europe to Asia. Advanced countries, initially subjectively believing that this virus was harmless, only the media tried to exaggerate it, are now in a tragic situation with a death toll of up to tens of thousands of people. Even the superpower America is struggling because of the rapid outbreak. Almost every country is in crisis when visited by COVID-19 [7].

In the face of piling up deaths, from hospitals, morgues, and prisons to damp boarding houses, the scenes that haunt the reader's mind are probably tragic stories about funeral services when "the living must make room for the dead" [5]. It can be said that Camus's novel *The Plague* is, to date, the novel that most thoroughly describes the rituals and burial methods during the pandemic. Unlike customary burial rituals, all procedures must be quick and simple and eliminate some rituals that are not appropriate to the context. Most of the dead are far from home, and relatives are not allowed to stay by their side to ensure epidemiological principles. Initially, people carried rows of stretchers and crawled to the bottom of the grave. At the end of the cemetery, people dug two large holes - a hole for men and a hole for women. Later, due to urgent circumstances, people buried both men and women together, regardless of whether it was appropriate or not.

Convoys of white-painted ambulances opened at full speed; their sirens sounded sadly on the deserted streets. People hastily threw the corpse into the hole. While the body was still swaying, shovels full of lime

fell on its face, and dirt and rocks were silently buried in holes dug deeper and deeper [5].

The bodies were naked and slightly contorted, covered with quicklime, then with soil, but only to a certain extent because there had to be room for other corpses. The next day, relatives are invited to sign the book, which marks the remaining difference between humans and, for example, dogs: after all, humans can still be checked [5].

Never before has the human condition been so tragic, from the time of illness, dying, and until death. Overcrowding when handling dead bodies forced the authorities to carry out cremation. "In the early days, early in the morning, a thick and clear vapor wafted over the eastern neighborhoods... every evening, the plague fire devoured the tribute people paid to it" [5]. Every day, fires are always burning in a corner of Oran city. It is engraved in the memories of the people involved, with clouds of smoke rising endlessly and brutally, more than the endless trampling, crushing everything in its path. Ever since then, humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century continues to be haunted by those unintentionally burning fires that smell of death when mentioning the keywords "COVID-19", "Wuhan", "Corona". The heaviness and greyness cover every place, accompanied by economic crises, inflation, health care, social services, etc. Camus highlights the quiet, unstable Oran region from the city to the suburbs. "The city is closed, and the port is banned. It is no longer possible to swim" [5].

A vast, silent city is only a collection of heavy, motionless cubes, and among those cubes, the silent statues of forgotten benefactors or eternal greats silent in a layer of brass, sitting alone in the night, with a face carved in stone or metal, recalling the destroyed image of what was once human [5].

In the suburbs, groans came from a few houses. In the past, when seeing this, there were often curious people standing on the street, listening. But after the prolonged plague, everyone's heart seemed to harden, and everyone walked or lived alongside laments as if it were still the natural language of humans [5].

This blockade has threatened the city's development. Hotels, restaurants, and souvenir shops are empty, with no customers coming. "All shops are closed... with signs saying "Closed because of the plague". Some businesses exist in limbo, uncertain like the uncertain fate of people.

“The plague bankrupted the tourism industry” [5]. The plague has negatively impacted other industries, such as food and paper production. “Although the paper crisis became increasingly severe, forcing some periodicals to reduce the number of pages, (...) soon, the newspaper only published columns advertising new products, “very effective” to prevent plague” [5]. Camus emphasized the fundamental issue: the fight against the plague is also a fight for the survival of the economy, tourism, law, and state power.

Faced with the dangers of COVID-19, people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can quickly realize what A. Camus’s writing is entirely accurate. Society in Iris Le’s *Sadness is Sowing The Seeds of Kindness* has changed in a not-very-optimistic direction.

After three months of fighting COVID-19, people can only see a Moscow winter afternoon behind those soulful windows: the barren tree branches of a person who has experienced so much pain and loss, the cold roads covered with white snow evoke much sadness and an endless darkness and gloom [7].

The Infectious Diseases Department of Westmead Hospital - Australia’s largest hospital - “is now so dilapidated that it is no longer recognizable” and is always overloaded, reeking of disinfectant, antiseptic alcohol, and betadine. All supermarkets were so short of food that “a few weeks later, the supermarket ordered that each person only buy two items of the same type at a time” [7]. The works present us with the pandemics that could create enormous social disruptions. In particular, rifts and conflicts also arise in relationships between people in society. When people have to interact together in a cramped place, are not allowed to be active outdoors, and cannot do anything, family life is in danger of being disrupted.

These days, everyone stays home to avoid the pandemic; the loud yelling and arguing still resounds endlessly. People cannot go out to work or make a living. The remaining money seems not enough for them to maintain life as before. The burden of money and family makes those scolding voices heard every day [6].

The terrible pandemic period has passed, oppressing human life and making the already difficult survival increasingly precarious and miserable. In that unstable

society, how did people react to the pandemic? This question is a concern of pandemic-themed works. Writers all have a standard answer in describing the progression from indifference and disregard for the pandemic to surprise, confusion, fear, and finally, pain, loneliness, and despair. When talking about past pandemics, O. Pamuk (2020) [15] drew notable parallels, they are most curious about similarities between the current coronavirus pandemic and the historical outbreaks of plague and cholera. There is an overabundance of similarities. Throughout human and literary history what makes pandemics alike is not mere commonality of germs and viruses but that our initial responses were always the same.

Pandemic crises in response to the pandemic have led to the “herd mentality” phenomenon. Many families, out of fear of interest and anxiety, have hoarded food, making the economic, commodity, and currency crisis increasingly severe.

Speculation played its part, and people sold the necessities that were then scarce on the market at unimaginable prices. Low-income families are challenging, while rich families need more. By its impartial action, the plague should have promoted equality among our fellow citizens. Still, on the contrary, through the natural effect of selfish habits, it makes the sense of injustice even more acute in people’s hearts [5].

The distinction between rich and poor also follows with a more significant gap. But, as an existentialist, Camus’s *The Plague* has differences and deeper points when focusing on portraying the suffering of human imprisonment and exile. They are “hostile to the past and have no future”, “we are no different from those whom justice or hatred of humanity forced to live behind iron bars” [5]; “Our compatriots, who until then hid their worries behind jokes, now, on the streets, appear more sullen and quieter” [5]; “From then on, people began to fear and ponder” [5]. In that prison life, they fell into a state of extreme sadness, loneliness, and absurdity everywhere they looked. “Their first reaction, for example, is to blame the state apparatus” [5]. They saw the irrational and irregular nature of the government apparatus and its rigid and demagogic operations. All hope in the authorities became unfounded, so there were families of sick people who agreed to close their doors

and not go to the hospital, preferring to face the plague rather than a separation that they knew would end. How is the department? They resisted violently - “the cries, the orders, the intervention of the police, and later the armed forces, and people attacking the sick” [5]. They also saw the empty and meaningless existence of humanity. It was a series of dreary days, repeating over and over in boredom - arms clinging to the doctor, lamenting, pleading, and crying; ambulance sirens blaring; Terrifying dreams that woke me up and I was alone, all my relatives died from the pandemic. Later, people are desperate to find the meaning of life by patching up the wounds that have healed deep in their hearts.

Camus's novel *The Plague* told readers about any pandemic situation, from the pandemic's victims to those who took advantage of it to speculate and profit. Groups of materialists in the expansionist trend of capitalism have painted an absurd scene: making money based on the pain of fellow human beings. Among people panicked and crazy because of the pandemic, victims barely alive waiting for oxygen machines in hospital beds amidst the gunfire guarding the city gate; dogs and cats died because of the spread of distrust, then people died not because of the epidemic but because they ran away and were shot to death; There are still greedy people who raise the prices of necessities, causing inflation and social disorder. For example, the character Cottard in Camus's novel *The Plague* tried to “make money” by raising medicine prices and selling fake medical supplies; unemployed people live freely on state subsidies but always cause agitations and protests or anonymous crowds packed with crimes, appearing as a challenge in life in Thuong Ha's novel *Nalis Drifted to The Shore of Destiny*. As proven by writers, this has always been the case: our society is full of absurdity.

More than a year has passed, even though the death toll is increasing, even though society is turned upside down, even though the economy is stagnating. Besides scientists and kind people who dedicate themselves unconditionally and sacrifice for the love of their fellow human beings, some still have been following their own selfish thoughts. They cannot let go of their greed, anger, and ignorance. And then, even at this time, when the world's epidemic is still not under control, it is people and capitalist corporations who take advantage of that to get

involved in manipulating and pushing up vaccine prices or even selling fake vaccines. Witnessing such human society makes the virus discover that what this pandemic has brought is not enough to awaken humanity [7].

When recreating society and people's reactions during the pandemic, Camus focused on the realities of Oran and, at the same time, evoking the depth of history. The writer wants to emphasize the absurd nature of life: the pandemics, like many other fantastic things that have existed in the past, people have no way to escape; instead, they have to change themselves through struggle, resilience, resistance. On the other hand, Vietnamese writers focus on a broader perspective, not only confined to one country but also connecting the world, helping their works expand the scope of reflection, which is also a way to emphasize this is a severe global pandemic. This difference comes from consciousness and perspective. Because Camus looked at the pandemic from the perspective of someone who had gone through it, the text settles on the depth of time; the narrative is thoughtful and calm, focusing on the most essential and fundamental issue. As for Vietnamese writers, they stand at the center of the pandemic; they wrote and felt the pandemic as “victims” rather than “historical storytellers.” Therefore, Vietnamese pandemic-themed novels in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century are complete with events that are believable, real, and close to today's life.

### **2.3. Ways to save people from the pandemic and messages of love**

The pandemic is not only a biological crisis but also a global humanitarian crisis. Therefore, compositions on pandemics suggest ways to save people from the pandemic and convey love through many different ways of expression and situations.

The first direction of liberation that people can think of when they are in trouble or despair is thanks to the support of spiritual forces. Religion, with its magical philosophies, becomes a source of encouragement for the human spirit to overcome difficulties. During Camus's *The Plague*, people defied blockades and quarantine orders to attend churches and squares to listen to Father Paneloux's sermons. Father's speeches attempt to show the plague's divine origin and this scourge's punitive nature. From a Christian perspective, the reason the pandemic appeared was to make people think again. The good is

gradually being lost because the world is compromising with too much evil. The sermon made some people - who were previously confused - now clearly realize their sins. However, the more they gather in crowded places and understand their mistakes, the more likely they will be infected and suffer confinement and a guilty conscience. The pandemic has not improved, but human psychology has fallen into an abyss of insecurity. "God just turned away. Without God's light, we will now be immersed in the darkness of the plague for a long time" [5]. Camus implied that, in the face of pandemics and death, God cannot save humans. Similar to Nietzsche's existential spirit, "God is dead", and in the modern way of musician T.C. Son, "God has abandoned humanity, Buddha has abandoned humanity". As a dialogue with Camus's novel *The Plague*, Thuong Ha's novel *Nalis Drifted to The Shore of Destiny* answers about human helplessness:

Speaking of those who pray to chase away Nalis, I am also pleased to be with you. Let's pray together!... Let's pray together and catch the pandemic together. What could be better than when you both get infected while going to pray?! I wonder if God is with you to help you avoid the pandemic? Will God save you? Or will you become pawns in the hands of God? [6].

Modern humans have lost their support. There is no god to extend a helping hand; only self-reliance and faith can help humanity overcome the great tribulation. For that reason, the novels have met each other at the intersection of love as a way to heal before the pandemic. It is also the most effective anti-pandemic solution. Father Paneloux's words still resonate: "My children, here, at last, is the mercy of God: he brings into all things good and evil, anger and mercy, plague and happiness. The disaster that hurts you lifts you and shows you the way" [5].

The expression of love is, first of all, the consensus of all classes, religions, races, and genders. The novel *The Plague* highlights Dr. Rieux's diligence and the spirit of solidarity and cooperation of the people around him. While some people do nothing, only kneel and pray to God and spread false information to confuse public opinion, Rieux, Tarrou, and their friends affirm that they must fight: "I always think that I am a stranger to this city and have nothing to do with you. But now that I've seen what's before me, I know I'm here, whether I like it or not. This work concerns all of us" [5].

Rambert's words as a journalist-storyteller affirm that the responsibility to fight the epidemic belongs to everyone, whether they are people in the city or "strangers", because the epidemic will not exclude anyone. So, readers will see that each character in the novel *The Plague* contributed to fighting the pandemic in different ways. That is Grand, an ordinary official at the city hall who always tries to grasp news promptly and accurately so as not to strengthen public opinion; That is journalist Rambert, even though he has a lover in Paris, but cannot bear to leave Oran alone; That is Father Paneloux - the priest who wants to reduce the pain of the people through words of sharing and encouragement; That is the intellectual Tarrou who always rebels with the desire to find a "Godless Saint"; especially Dr. Rieux, who worked day and night tirelessly to find ways to repel the pandemic.

The spirit of solidarity against the pandemic is also the main content in the novel *Quarantine Days* by B.Q. Thang. As the first novel on the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam, *Quarantine Days* focuses on raising community awareness, self-awareness, and compliance with the Ministry of Health regulations and current laws. Just one individual being unconscious and short-sighted in their thinking and acting impulsively will lead to unpredictable consequences. Because of being subjective, Tony's boyfriend forced H. Cuc and his relatives to go to the quarantine area. From here, her family's life had significant changes. There was the loss, but H. Cuc also learned to sympathize, be friendly, and understand people. In the middle of an isolated, closed place, the "rich lady" can "reinstall" herself in the enlightenment of an open self.

Each novel expresses different concepts about the "anti-pandemic hero" with this inspiration. As is a common motif in tribulation legends, a heroic character will appear to help people escape the pandemic. Although Rieux was the "hero" of the Plague, Camus refuses all methods of idealistic depiction of this character. Because Camus saw that the plague disrupts the human situation: a physical and a spiritual plague, it puts us in a precarious position between life and death, good and bad, both devastating to human life and destroying humanity. So, in the struggle with the plague, Dr. Rieux never considered himself a hero [5] but only considered what he did as a

practicing doctor and thought, “Wherever my strength is, I will protect them”. Even when he learned of his wife’s illness and death, Rieux could not stay by her side and take care of her in the last days of her life. He could only comfort her as Tarrou said: “Courage! Now is the time to act right!”. “There are no heroic issues. It’s a matter of honesty... The only way to fight the plague is honesty” [5]. The author borrowed the character’s words to guide the process of anti-pandemic practice, starting from kindness, honesty, and scheming because only these things can fight the irrational virus.

On the contrary, the three novels *Quarantine Days*, *Nalis Drifting to The Shore of Destiny*, and *Sadness is Sowing The Seeds of Kindness* all have classic romantic qualities with respect to the doctors, the nurses, the police, and the soldiers. Writers see them as “heroes fighting the pandemic”. Because if there is a pandemic, the people who work hard and sacrifice the most are them. The plot of the novel *Nalis Drifting to The Shore of Destiny* is a thorny, violent struggle between two front lines: Police Officer Thanh and the Nalis virus. Neither side can determine victory or defeat because at the end of the work, “when drifting towards the shore of destiny”, Thanh realizes that the virus “Nalis is also on the shore of destiny”. Thereby, Vietnamese novels affirm the truth: we must respect, cherish, and support medical professionals and the armed forces. A satisfactory ending after many incidents during the *Quarantine Days* highlights the role of Police Officers. Police Officer Tuan’s love helped Hoang Cuc understand that “twenty days of quarantine here does not mean that life paused, but on the contrary, it means pausing to live - live truly, live fully, live each day to the fullest, and especially live true to yourself” [10]. Although the story’s happening is still awkward, through Tuan’s love, writer B.Q. Thang wants to express the message: If we have a hero, we have a fairy tale in the middle of a pandemic. Readers also understand why, in many touching stories during the pandemic season, writer I. Le describes people’s feelings for nurses and doctors: “After being discharged from the hospital, patients sometimes come back with fresh flowers and lots of candy. Their gait is healthy and agile, and their faces are radiant and rosy. They will come to each nurse to thank them and give them tight hugs and kisses on the cheeks and hands to express gratitude from the bottom of their hearts” [7]. In Australia, there have been volunteer campaigns such as

supporting masks for nurses and doctors, sponsoring free accommodation, “adopting medical staff”. Small actions like that have spread warmth all over the Earth as a message of love.

Turning to nature and protecting the environment is also a way to eliminate the pandemic through literary texts. During the tense and oppressive plague moment in Oran, Rieux and Tarrou took a somewhat reckless action - going to the beach. The two friends felt strangely happy when immersed in nature, as if “the pandemic had forgotten them” [5]. Oran was a symbolic city, serving as a place of human exile and highlighting the nature of climate change. In that city, people live in sadness, mechanically, and lostly. As Camus demonstrated, losing trees, animals, and nature, the city became a favorable place for the plague to penetrate, develop and destroy, people were pushed into inhumanity.

As T. Ha also said: “The scary thing in this world is not the Nalis virus, nor is it a pandemic or natural disaster. The scariest thing in this world is human greed. Greed becomes the bitter medicine that, if consumed, humanity will perish. That is insatiable greed with the ambition to become the world’s hegemon. Heaven or hell, the demonic animal self, is hidden inside the rotten soul. A demonic mind resides in the middle of a green planet that is gradually crying every day. Please forgive us. If one day this world disappears, and people die en masse, it will not be because of the pandemic, nor because of Nalis. It’s all because of human selfishness” [6].

So, in rescuing humans on the brink of extinction, humanity has realized that the best vaccine is not prepared or invented in laboratories or factories but is the vaccine of peace and love blossoming in the human soul.

### 3. Conclusions

In modern society, with the rise of the individual and the desire to search for oneself, decode the spiritual world, and achieve absolute freedom, the problems of communal pandemics and physical pain are temporarily overlooked and forgotten. Only when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out did people’s perceptions change direction. Literature goes from the inner mystery to the outside - it turns out, the pandemic is always with us. Physical pain is just as painful and painful as mental pain. A pandemic is like a natural screening, like a hurricane

that sweeps away organisms that are considered genetically weak and unable to adapt. Or pandemics are like the “animal instinct” in each person, existing forever and always motivating people to exist between life and death. We need the synergistic operation of a vigilant mind and a warm heart to fight it. As Camus said: “The plague germ never dies or disappears. It can lie still for decades in furniture and clothes. It waits patiently in rooms, basements, chests, handkerchiefs, piles of code paper, etc. And one day, it will cause disaster to humans and teach them a lesson; the plague may wake up its rats and make them run to die in a particular city that lives in happiness, peace, and prosperity” [5]. Or T. Ha asserted: “This pandemic will not end if people are still indulging in their own greedy and selfish desires” [6]. Literature with the theme of pandemics recounts human tragedies and suggests ways to prevent pandemics. Camus’s *The Plague* metaphysically reflects the state of human abandonment on Earth. The pandemic of contemporary Vietnamese writers recreates the reality of the problem of humans destroying the Earth. Although the paths have different turns, they meet in the message of love, rejection of war, and a peaceful lifestyle with all species. There is no need for expensive vaccines or scarce medical masks to prevent the pandemic, and just beautiful literature can erase each “virus” from the human mind to receive the holiest thing. That is also the mission of literature in life.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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