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Literary Response to Pandemic: An Anthropocentric Analysis of The Philosophy of Death in *The Years of Rice and Salt*

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Abstract: Literature is a mirror of the society which contains the socio-cultural history which is otherwise difficult to note down in the mainstream history. It is a parallel world of signs, symbols and metaphors that unveils the coils of deeper psyche and how it carries the effects of the socio-cultural milieu which is further stored and sustained in the collective consciousness of the society in the form of myths and literature. In every century there are certain historical events that left the deep imprints on human mind. Among these events, pandemic is one of the major incidences happening with the interval of few centuries, that not only shakes the roots of human culture but it also challenges the very existence of mankind. In *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002) an alternate history novel by American science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson deals with how world history might have been different if the Black Death plague had killed 99 percent of Europe's population, instead of a third as it did in reality. Divided into ten parts, the story spans hundreds of years, from the army of the Muslim conqueror Timur to the 21st century, with Europe being re-populated by Muslim pioneers, the indigenous peoples of the America forming a league to resist Chinese and Muslim invaders. Literary history of the world which is revealed through this novel has also given a wide space to the thematic concern of pandemic.

KeyWords: - Society, pandemic, post-apocalyptic, death, anthropocentric, plague, timur.

The instances of pandemic as thematic concerns in literature can be noted from the very beginning of literature like ancient Greek plays of Homer, who in his *Iliad* depicted a nine-day plague as a curse of the Greek deity Apollo. Though the cause of the break of pandemic is a supernatural, its depiction is quite realistic in the epic. The literature of the world has responded to the major pandemics like – Plague of Cyprian, Plague of Justinian, The Black Death, Cocoliztli epidemic, American Plagues, Great Plague of London, Great Plague of Marseille, Russian plague, Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic,



Flu pandemic, American polio epidemic, Spanish Flu and most recent covid-19. The literature not only depicted the health crises, but it also explored how the social institutions, governments systems and the human psyche broke in the wake of pandemic. It shows that how the established human culture is devastated due to the invisible virus that questions human supremacy over the nature. It let the people know that they are also a small part of the wild and great Nature and no animal is superior in hierarchy.

As the social institutions were destructed, the human society turned into a savage world of Jungle, where the existence prevails to anything else. Public health crises subverted all the artificial cultural codes and conducts along with the superficial human emotions. As the feeling of security dismantles in the wake of pandemic, the characters start adopting the selfish social behavior. Its good example is witnessed in the outbreak of Covid-19, as in America the sale of guns increased surprisingly during the health crises. The government systems developed for the security and well-being of the weaker stakeholders of the society are substituted with the security of the special one. Therefore, most of the novels can be seen as a political commentary on the event, which depicted how the secular masks of the governments torn out to show the real savage face of the autocratic governments.

Besides these socio-political thematic concerns, there are few authors who have used the situation to muse with the philosophy of death. They have used it as a situation where the life is juxtaposed with the constant threat of the death. The existence becomes important and as a result the people start witnessing death without the shield of culture or religion. In the new world where the pandemic is taking its harsh toll on the lives of mankind, the religion appears as a meaningless human endeavor. Few the authors have also depicted that how the pandemic is a sheer act of divine to punish the rude, selfish and arrogant mankind. Few of them relate it with the day of Judgement, Pralaya and Qayamat.

However, there is great number of authors who think it in terms of science in which the deteriorating situation of nature due to the human interference is the cause of the pandemic. Most of such kinds of novels depict the pandemic as an act of balancing the nature. There are several thematic serotypes that needed to be classified and categorized. It is very relevant today to deal with such kind of literature which many times appears as a prophecy of future and creates a simulacrum that mirrors the futuristic reality. The present proposed study deals with the select novels that explore the pandemic situation and its social, economic, psychological and political consequences. The present study selects



the novel, *The Years of Rice and Salt*, which refers to the everyday chores of raising a family, often performed by women, despite the politics and wars of men. He A novelist imagines 700 years of history in which the plague has wiped out the West and China and Islam rule the globe.

The novelist departs from his interest in the near future with its scientific probabilities and instead writes an alternative history of the distant past, when the Black Death or bubonic plague ravished Europe in the 1300's. He has an extensive cast of characters from the several major eras explored in the novel. It is episodic, both because of the long time frame encompassed but also because the novel's events occur all over the globe. With the disappearance of the Christian West and its historical future—the age of European exploration and the European-led scientific and industrial revolutions, to mention just the most obvious—history is much changed. Instead of a Western civilization long influenced by Christian beliefs and practices, other religions and cultures take primacy. In *The Years of Rice and Salt*, Robinson exhibits a deep knowledge of and wide familiarity with the history and cultures of Islam, China, and India, including their religions and beliefs. Robinson explains this in very clear words.

"This is what the human story is, not the emperors and the generals and their wars, but the nameless actions of people who are never written down, the good they do for others passed on like a blessing, just doing for strangers what your mother did for you, or not doing what she always spoke against. And all that carries forward and makes us what we are." (Page 385)

Awake to Emptiness, book one, opens with Bold and Psin, scouts in Timur's army, discover a city called Magyar, where all the inhabitants have died from a plague. Timur turns around his army and orders Bold and Psin to be executed to avoid the plague, but he escapes and wanders through the dead lands of Eastern Europe. He is captured by Turkish traders and along with Kyu, a young African slave. They are and sold into Zheng He's Chinese treasure fleet. At the death of the old emperor, the ever-ambitious Kyu and Bold are murdered and enter into world of the Bardo, where they await judgment according to their karma. Their deeds will determine their next incarnation—as a human again or possibly as an animal or even an insect. In the Bardo, Kyu, Bold, and other characters retain memories of their pasts until reincarnated in the next life. According to Bold "We always meet in the Bardo. We will cross paths for as long as the six worlds turn in this cycle of the cosmos. We are part of a karmic



jati,” a cast structure or lineage in Hinduism. Robinson has this to say while explaining this myth to his readers.

I died as mineral and came back as plant, Died as plant and came back as animal, Died as animal and came back a man. Why should I fear? When have I ever lost by dying? Yet once more I shall die human, to soar with angels blessed above. And when I sacrifice my angel soul I shall become what no mind ever conceived. (Page 421)

Book Two, *The Hajj in the Heart*, portrays Mughal India where a Hindu girl named Kokila poisons her husband's father and brother after discovering their plot to defraud the village. She is executed for her crime, but is reborn as a tiger that befriends a man named Bistami, a Sufi mystic of Persian origin. Bistami goes on to become a judge for Mughal Emperor Akbar, but later falls into his disfavor, being exiled to Mecca.

In Book Three, *Ocean Continents*, it is Chinese Admiral Kheim, sailing to Nippon (Japan) drifts off course to the east, arriving in a new land, possibly history's San Francisco Bay and discovers America, not the famous Christopher Columbus. Butterfly, a young native, accompanies the Chinese ships south along the coast to an Inca-like civilization, where Butterfly and Kheim are taken high into the mountains to be sacrificed to the gods. They escape the natives, but not the Bardo.

An alchemist named Khalid, in book Four, *The Alchemist*, attempts to fool the Khan into believing that he has discovered the Philosopher's stone, but his fraud is uncovered and his hand is chopped off as punishment. He, his son-in-law Bahram, and Iwang, a Tibetan Buddhist, argue for a heliocentric universe, attempt to measure both the speed of sound and of light, and develop a telescope, discovering, as did history's Galileo, the moons of Jupiter. However, the plague strikes and the jati is again in the bardo,

Book Five, *Warp and Weft*, describes how a former Samurai, fleeing from Japan inspires the natives in the vicinity of the Great Lakes region called Hodenosaunee to resist both Muslims from the east and Chinese from the west by using guns and other foreign weapons. They name him "Fromwest" and make him a chief of their confederacy. He helps organize their society into a larger defensive alliance of all the North American tribes and shows them how to make their own guns with which to resist the Chinese coming from the West and the Muslims coming from the East.



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Book Six, *Widow Kang*, follows the life of Chinese widow Kang Tongbi during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor. She takes in a poor Buddhist monk, Bao Ssu, and his son whom she finds scavenging. Her second husband, Ibrahim, sees their commonalities, attempts to reconcile Islam and Buddhism, but fails as differences between the various segments of the Muslim population and the Han Chinese leads to communal violence. A possible solution to the various religious- cultural-political-military conflicts occurs in the 1800's when an Indian navy seizes Konstantiniyye (Constantinople) from the Ottoman Turks. Ismail, the sultan's doctor, had long been in communication with Bhakta, abbess of a hospital in Travancore in southern India, ruled by Kerala, an enlightened Hindu ruler. Kerala's aim is to overthrow the Muslim Mughal dynasty which has long ruled much of India.

Book Seven, *The Age of Great Progress*, is set during the 19th century and begins during a war between the Ottoman Empire and the Indian state of Travancore. The Indians have previously defeated the Mughals and the Safavids and have developed more modern forms of warfare. The Age of Great Progress ends with the "War of the Asuras," in which Qing China, allied with the Travancore League, fights a long war against Dar al-Islam, which controls most of Eurasia, Africa, and the southern part of the Western Hemisphere. A Muslim Armenian doctor named Ismail ibn Mani al-Dir, who had served the Ottoman Sultan, is captured and sent to Travancore where he learns of the amazing advancements that have been made on the sub-continent such as railways and factories. He happily joins the hospital of Travancore and begins work in anatomy and physiology. Ismail eventually meets their ruler, the Kerala of Travancore, who pursues scientific and philosophical advancement. The Kerala's aim is to drive the Muslim invaders away and peacefully unify India into a kind of democratic confederation. A displaced Japanese slave, Kiyooki, and a pregnant Chinese refugee, Peng-ti, manage to flee to the great coastal city of Fangzhang.^[6] There Kiyooki joins a secret Japanese freedom movement that is being aided by Travancore, with Ismail acting as a go-between agent.

Book Eight, *War of the Asuras*, is set in the 20th century, during the "Long War". The world has become divided into three large alliances, the Chinese Empire and its colonies, the fractured Muslim world and the democratic Indian and Hodenosaunee Leagues. In what is an obvious parallel to the wars of history's twentieth century, particularly to the trench warfare of World War I, the war of the Asuras goes on for decades, exemplified by the tribulations of three Chinese officers, Kuo, Bai, and Iwa, stationed in east-



central Asia. In the aftermath of the war—won by the Chinese-Travancore alliance—the novel returns to Firanja, where Budur, a young Muslim woman, flees from her conservative home to follow her aunt Idelba, who is secretly exploring the possibility of splitting “alactin,” or the atom. Budur becomes a student of Kirana, a liberated Muslim woman, who is critical of an Islam dominated by conservative males and who argues that the women of the Hodenosaunee (the northern Western Hemisphere) have the greatest freedom and influence.

Book Nine, *Nsara*, follows the life of a young Muslim woman named Budur and her aunt Idelba in Europe, in the aftermath of the Long War. Budur's family is highly traditional and as there are not enough men left after the war for marriage prospects, she is forced to live in seclusion with her female cousins in the family's compound in Turi. One night, Idelba escapes and Budur follows her. Together they leave the life of captivity in the Alps and move to the more liberal and cosmopolitan city of Nsara in France. Throughout this, Idelba has been secretly working on atomic physics and she and her fellow researchers have made some disturbing discoveries. They conclude that it would be possible to make a lethal weapon from nuclear chain reactions and fear that the military will try to create such bombs and restart the war. In order to prevent this, Idelba tries desperately to hide all evidence about her research and contacts concerned scientists in other parts of the world. The government learns of her work however. They agree that none of them will work on the creation of nuclear weapons for their respective countries, no matter what pressure they are put under by their governments and also start a new international scientific movement to break down barriers between cultures in a spirit of reconciliation and friendship. They even create a new scientific calendar to be used by the whole world, with its year zero set from the time of the conference.

Book Ten, *The First Years*, follows Bao Xinhua. Bao is a revolutionary in China, who works under the leadership of his friend, Kung Jianguo. Bao and Kung successfully overthrow the oppressive Chinese government, but Kung is killed on the cusp of their victory. In his later years, Bao moves to Fangzhang to teach history and the philosophy of history, and at the end of the novel, he meets a new student named Kali, the Hindu goddess of death.

Robinson's novels invariably combine an adventurous and very readable narrative with philosophical subthemes. *The Years of Rice and Salt* ends with an implicit question, the question that the members of



the jati debated in the bardo for many eons. Can individuals escape from the wheel of eternal reincarnation through their own efforts? Is there truly free will or is humanity—history—merely following a preordained or predestined script or path? Even if there is no exit from the wheel, must not the individual at least attempt to act as if free? In several monologues and dialogues, Robinson's characters discuss the nature of history and the forces, religious and otherwise, which shape it, assuming it has a recognizable shape. Robinson's philosophy for this is...

The universe itself is holy, human beings are sacred, all the sentient beings are sacred and can work to be enlightened, and one must only pay attention to daily life, the middle way, and give thanks and worship in daily action. It is the most unassuming of religions. Not even a religion, but more a way to live. (Page 461)

Robinson calls himself a "utopian novelist" in that he claims "all science fiction has a utopian element, in that it tends to say that what we do now matters and will have consequences". Robinson's interest, here, is in the sweep of history. He is very interested in the notions of Chinese Colonialism, of the rigidity of Islam and possibilities for change in that religion, of the possible contributions of the natives of North America to modern society if their cultures had been able to survive the diseases and other depredations of the Old World invaders. And, of course, of the role and place of women in the process of altering that history. This makes it a novel in which chance and human nature intertwine in countless ways, producing an alternate history that provocatively intersects with and departs from our own. It offers a vision of the world in which what shapes our fate, in the end, are the raw materials of humanity. It is our persistence for better life, that decides the course of our actions and reactions. In Robinson's words...

My feeling is that until the number of whole lives is greater than the number of shattered lives, we remain stuck in some kind of prehistory, unworthy of humanity's great spirit. History as a story worth telling will only begin when the whole lives outnumber the wasted ones. (Page 475)

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