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Of Authors and Characters: A Utopian Reading of Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt*

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Abstract: The following essay offers a utopian reading of Kim Stanley Robinson's alternate history novel *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002), which foregrounds the author's own voice and focuses on characterization. Robinson (b. Waukegan, Illinois, 1952) is known for his science fiction, particularly for the Mars trilogy consisting of *Red Mars* (1992), *Green Mars* (1993) and *Blue Mars* (1996). His most recent work, in a career that spans more than forty years, is the utopian novel about climate change *The Ministry for the Future* (2020). Direct contact with Robinson while

writing a chapter on this latest novel led the author to suggest that I wrote about *Years of Rice and Salt* from an academic position that approached authorship and characterization using a less rigid theoretical framework. Robinson's suggestion came after he criticized the draft of my article on his Science in the Capital trilogy (*Forty Signs of Rain*, 2004; *Fifty Degrees Below*, 2005; *Sixty Days and Counting*, 2007) as too reductionist with respect to the function of the male characters in the text, characters that I criticized from the point of view of Gender Studies. The fruitful

conversation with Robinson led me to reflect on how we produce literary criticism today based on the works of living authors. The thesis (and position) I defend here is that the author's voice, as expressed in interviews or in personal contact, should be integrated into literary criticism, and that characterization should be examined further as a still very mysterious process of creation. As for *The Years of Rice and Salt*, I argue here that the character K brings together in its various incarnations the utopian discourse of the novel, not without a disturbing, destructive potential.

Key words: Kim Stanley Robinson, *Years of Rice and Salt*, science fiction, alternate history, utopia, characterization, gender, patriarchy, literary criticism

Resumen: El siguiente ensayo ofrece una lectura de la novela de historia alternativa de Kim Stanley Robinson *The Years of Rice and Salt* (*Tiempos de arroz y sal*) de 2002, que pone en primer plano la propia voz del autor y se centra a continuación en la caracterización. Robinson (n. Waukegan, Illinois, 1952) es conocido por su ciencia ficción, particularmente por la trilogía de Marte compuesta por *Red Mars* [*Marte rojo*] (1992), *Green Mars* [*Marte verde*] (1993) y *Blue Mars* [*Marte azul*] (1996). Su obra más reciente, dentro de una carrera que se extiende a lo largo de más de cuarenta años, es la novela utópica experimental sobre el cambio climático *The Ministry for the Future* [*El ministerio del futuro*] (2020). El contacto directo con Robinson durante la escritura de un capítulo sobre esta novela llevó al autor a sugerirme que escribiera sobre *Tiempos de arroz y sal* desde una posición académica que abordara la autoría y la caracterización utilizando un marco teórico menos rígido. La sugerencia de Robinson se produjo después de que el autor

criticara el borrador de un artículo de mi autoría sobre su trilogía *Science in the Capital* [*Ciencia en la capital*] (*Forty Signs of Rain* [*Señales de lluvia*] 2004; *Fifty Degrees Below* [*Cincuenta grados bajo cero*], 2005; *Sixty Days and Counting* [*Más de sesenta días*], 2007) como demasiado reduccionista con respecto a la función de los personajes masculinos en el texto, personajes que critiqué desde el punto de vista de los Estudios de Género. La fructífera conversación con Robinson, en resumen, me ha llevado a reflexionar sobre cómo producimos crítica literaria hoy en día basada en las obras de autores vivos. La tesis (y posición) que defiendo aquí es que la voz del autor, tal como se expresa en las entrevistas o en contacto personal, debe integrarse en la crítica literaria, y también que la caracterización debe examinarse más a fondo como un proceso de creación aún muy misterioso. En cuanto a *Tiempos de arroz y sal*, argumento aquí que el personaje K aglutina en sus diversas encarnaciones el discurso utópico de la novela, no sin una inquietante carga potencialmente destructiva.

Palabras clave: Kim Stanley Robinson, *Years of Rice and Salt*, *Tiempos de arroz y sal*, ciencia ficción, historia alternativa, utopía, caracterización, género, patriarcado, crítica literaria

Introduction: Why Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt* and Why Now

Kim Stanley Robinson, born in 1952 in Waukegan, Illinois, but a resident of California for decades, is a notable American writer with a career spanning now more than forty years. Robinson's notable skills as a prose writer, and his proficiency in world-building and plot development, have placed him in an

indisputable top position among the authors practicing speculative fiction.¹ The author so far of twenty-one novels and diverse short story collections, Robinson is known, above all, for his Mars trilogy composed by *Red Mars* (1992), *Green Mars* (1993), and *Blue Mars* (1996), and secondly, for his generation ship novel *Aurora* (2015) and his climate-change utopian, experimental novel *The Ministry for the Future* (2020).

Robinson's thirteenth novel *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002)² was the winner of the 2003 Locus Award for Best Science Fiction Novel, receiving nominations for the Hugo Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and the British Science Fiction Award, more than sufficient evidence of its interest and quality. *Years* is alternate (or alternative) historical fiction which supposes that the Black Plague (1346-1353) killed practically all the inhabitants of the European territories. This crisis, point of divergence, "nexus event" (Hellekson, 2013: 6), or Jonbar hinge, means that most white Christians have perished, allowing China and the Muslim civilization known as Dar al-Islam to vie for world leadership; other powers, such as India's state of Travancore, Japan, or the North American Hodenosaunee community play significant roles in this alternative version of history.

Showing great ambition, Robinson narrates how Earth evolves in this alternate scenario for eight centuries, until the equivalent of real-life 2088, using ten novellas (or 'books') for the

purpose. These novellas, set in different times and places, are linked by a recurring cast of three main characters, who can be recognized by the initial of their names, despite appearing as persons of different genders, nations, races, and ages. The K character is a fighter constantly dissatisfied with his or her oppressive surroundings, whereas the B character tries to adapt, as best s/he can, to changing circumstances; the I-character is always inquisitive and thirsty for new knowledge. As a committed Buddhist, Robinson supposes that these characters are part of an old jati, or interconnected group of individuals, that has been reincarnating since their original birth in ancient Tibet. This neat narrative device allows the author to cover the span of the eight centuries with solvency, though it may strain at points the readers' willing suspension of disbelief, particularly in the transitional episodes set in the bardo, the space in Buddhism where souls await new incarnations. Farah Mendlesohn, for instance, criticized in her review that the bardo scenes "do not belong in this book (...) because the structure of *The Years of Rice and Salt* is ostensibly polysemic, that being the baseline of all alternate histories, while the scenes in the bardo insist on the Truth" (2002: 25).

To my knowledge, *Years* has inspired so far five academic essays by, in chronological order, Frisch (2005), Wegner (2009, reprinted 2014), Kneale (2010), Prettyman (2010), and Pak (2019). I'm the first woman scholar to approach

¹ Robinson is the winner so far of seven Locus awards, three Nebula awards, two Hugos, one BSFA and one John W. Campbell Memorial Award. He won his last major award in 2013 for *2312* but was honored in 2016 with the Robert A. Heinlein Award to his whole *oeuvre* and in 2018 with the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Imagination in Service to Society. He collaborates with the Sierra Nevada Research Institute (he's a committed rock climber), the Clarion Writers' Workshop, and UC San Diego's Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human Imagination. See the unofficial website <https://www.kimstanleyrobinson.info/> for more information on the author (Robinson's publishers Hachette maintain his Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/kimstanleyrobinson>).

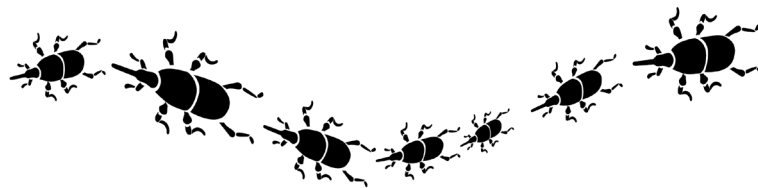
² The title of the novel refers to the fifth stage of life in a woman's life: "milk teeth, hair-pinned-up, marriage, children, rice and salt, widowhood" (*Years* 372).

Years in depth, a point I must underline as it is relevant for the argument I present here, though other feminist women have reviewed this novel, among them SF author Jo Walton and, as noted, SF scholar Farah Mendlesohn. I do not know what motivated the other five scholars to discuss this novel. In my case, it was a direct hint from Robinson himself during a personal conversation on email, which needs to be incorporated into the present article as part of its framework. I relate these background details because I wish to emphasize that it is not usual for authors and the scholars studying their work to maintain any contact. Rather, we tend mostly to focus on the text, as if it had not arisen from a living person's imagination. I intend to break that dynamic as far as I can in the present essay, not only for SF but for all literature.

I cannot call myself a specialist in Robinson's *oeuvre*, being familiar with only about half of his novels, but I have been an admirer since reading his Mars trilogy almost twenty years ago. In 2017 Wesleyan University Press accepted my translation of Manuel de Pedrolo's Catalan masterpiece, the SF novel *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* (1974), finally published as *Typescript of the second origin* in 2018. To my immense delight, Robinson kindly agreed to write the prologue, in which he shows

a sound knowledge of the Catalan struggles for independence, and of the place of Pedrolo and of his novel in the context of Catalan culture. I asked English SF author Ian Watson, my mentor throughout the process of translating Pedrolo and a close friend of Robinson's, for his email address and I sent Robinson a message with my deepfelt thanks. However, I was prevented from meeting Robinson during his visit to Barcelona in March 2017, and we have never met in person. I emailed him again years later, in 2022, when I published "A Celebration of Mature Love: Posthuman Sexuality, Gender, and Romance in Kim Stanley Robinson's *2312*," an article which I wrote as devotedly as I could to thank the author once more for the prologue. He replied with a generous email offering ample proof that he had read my essay with great care and attention and offering, as well, to stay in touch.

When in 2023 I started work on my book *Masculinity in Contemporary Science Fiction by Men: No Plans for the Future* (2025), I emailed Robinson again. This book includes the chapter "Men in Despair: Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*," and my initial message on it started a fascinating conversation about how authors deal with characters. (With apologies for the spoiler), a sign of how deeply distressed I was by the death



of Frank May, the main male character in this novel, is that, quite embarrassingly, I started one of the messages as “Dear Frank” rather than “Dear Stan” (as the author prefers to be called). Robinson excused my gaffe, much bemused, and put up with my complaints about why May had to die for a few more messages. I thought it was an unfair authorial decision while he maintained that it was not a decision he made, but an event to which the character’s tragic life naturally led. In a later message, in 2024, I asked Robinson to please write one of the blurbs for my forthcoming book, which he agreed to do with his proverbial generosity. I also mentioned that I had drafted an article on masculinity on his Science in the Capital trilogy (*Forty Signs of Rain*, 2004; *Fifty Degrees Below*, 2005; *Sixty Days and Counting*, 2007).

The trilogy Science in the Capital is, certainly, superb climate-change SF, but I struggled to connect with the main character, scientist Frank Vanderwal, which resulted in a more critical analysis than the others I had written about Robinson’s fiction. I determined, however, that it was somehow disloyal to conceal this essay from the author, in view of his immense generosity towards me, and I sent it to him. He forwarded me in the same message an extremely positive blurb for my book, and a friendly but forthright critique of my approach to the men in his trilogy. Robinson’s complaint was that I had applied a reductive Gender Studies theoretical framework and thus produced a biased reading by which his three main male characters appeared to be mechanical constructions

corresponding to a preconceived ideological grid concerning masculinity, when, actually, the whole process of creation had been far more subjective, emotional, and, I’ll add, organic. It is clear enough, for instance, that the efforts of co-protagonist Charlie Quibler to combine his job as political adviser with being a stay-at-home father most likely reflect Robinson’s own personal experience, which he has discussed in diverse interviews. Yet, as I argued back, literary scholars can only work with the text, having no direct access to the authors’ motivations and process of creation, beyond the chance to interview them (or communicate by email). I offered then to read any other of Robinson’s novels and open a new conversation about how to approach it. Robinson suggested then that I read *The Years of Rice and Salt*, which I did immediately.

I have, then, worked on this novel knowing that the author would be my first reader, as he was.³ I have also worked with full awareness that not everything the author disclosed to me about the process of creating the plot of *Years*, in the confidence of private personal correspondence, can be revealed, being of a painful personal nature. Robinson is right to complain that we, literary scholars, necessarily misread novels, since we cannot know how fiction is written from the author’s point of view. Even if we learn about fundamental personal issues, our craft is shaped so that these issues cannot be integrated into critical discussion. I don’t refer here only to biographical aspects that might explain how a character is born in the writer’s imagination, but to the irrational processes that, according

³ Robinson did enjoy the draft of the present article. As he wrote to me, “Your article was a pleasure to read for me in what you emphasized in the story, and how the parts of the story work together. As for your account of how you read the book, and wrote your essay, this I found interesting, and perhaps an example of what I see is now getting called ‘auto-criticism’ to match the term ‘auto-fiction’” (email, 7 April 2025). I quite like the label ‘auto-criticism’ and, of course, I’m very pleased that the author endorses my work, though I’m aware that his endorsement has limited value in an academic context in which peer reviewing prevails.

to most authors, guide narration; above all, the illusion described by so many authors that characters control the narrative or that, as Robinson claimed in the case of doomed Frank May, their lives are subjected to turning points over which authors have no control.

Although he was not particularly pleased with my approach to masculinity in the Science in the Capital trilogy, Robinson suggested that I might perhaps read *The Years of Rice and Salt* from a Gender Studies perspective. My predecessors have focused on how Robinson deals with history but, even though they have produced very helpful essays on his novel, they have generally ignored the nuances of characterization and, in particular, the representation and position of the female characters. Curiously, the complaint that Robinson cares more about history than about his characters is repeated in some of the reviews. Kara, for instance, notes that Robinson “neglects the minutiae of his characters’ various lives. The detail he adds to the settings, many of which would be unfamiliar to Eurocentrically-educated readers like myself, doesn’t quite compensate for this lack of characterization” (2009: online). Similarly, Brooks observes that “The protagonists’ true stories only unfold over the entire length of the novel and it’s only on this grand scale that we really get a sense of shape and closure; on the closer scale of the individual novellas, lives are cut short, stories stop” (2002: online). I don’t agree that *Years* lacks characterization, though Robinson’s method does indeed require a large-scale view of his very long, multiple text to gain a proper perspective. Frisch argues that

if there is one major suspense device ongoing in Robinson’s novel, it is

character rather than plot oriented; specifically, whether or not the karmic jati trio, who carry forward into each new reincarnation only ‘intimations’ of their own immortality, will ever completely recall their original incarnation as a group in ancient Tibet. (2005: 32)

This is not, however, as I see it, the main concern. Robinson’s novel is indeed character oriented, yet the main center of interest is not the trio’s recall of their links, but the learning curve and the evolution of the character K.

Being unable to offer a fully comprehensive view of the interactions of the jati trio within the limits of one journal essay, no matter how long, I focus here on K. I do this out of my interest in his/her constant rebelliousness, but also because Robinson explained to me that the starting impulse for writing *Years* emerged in his imagination after a tragic loss in his family. Following this indication, I argue that K articulates in its⁴ various incarnations the utopian discourse of the novel, not without a disquieting, destructive potential.

Listening to the Author: Tracing Motivation

Fredric Jameson discussed in *The Political Unconscious* the “dialectical and structural relationship” (1991: 284) that science fiction maintains with the historical novel, which he defined as “a relationship of kinship and inversion all at once, of opposition and homology” (284). Whereas the historical novel responds to “the emergence of historicity,” science fiction “corresponds to the waning or the blockage of that historicity, and, particularly

⁴ I use pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’, and adjectives ‘his’, ‘her’ or ‘its’ to refer to K. I have avoided ‘they/theirs’ because K is always distinctly gendered as either male or female. I use ‘its’ when I refer jointly to both genders.

in our own time (in the postmodern era), to its crisis and paralysis, its enfeeblement and repression” (1991: 284). In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson attributed to science-fictional utopia the mission of shaking historicity out of its “paralysis” though he warned that “the center of gravity” of utopian narrative often

shifts towards an auto-referentiality of a specific, but far more concrete type: such texts then explicitly or implicitly, and as it were against their own will, find their deepest ‘subjects’ in the possibility of their own production, in the interrogation of the dilemmas involved in their own emergence as utopian texts (2005: 292).

This perspective perfectly fits the Herculean task Robinson gave himself in writing *Years*, which could only be accomplished with a great deal of reflection on what constitutes a novel and how science fiction of a utopian cast can integrate history. There are abundant traces of this process of reflection in the interviews Robinson has given over the years, and I turn to them in this section.

In view of the actual existence of authors, Roland Barthes’s notorious declaration that the author is dead, in his seminal 1967 essay, is an act of astonishing critical arrogance. Following a well-established current in French criticism since the 1930s, Barthes was opposing the corrupt romantic criticism based on finding biographical clues in the texts and on deciphering authorial intention. His adamant position, however, greatly undermined the

potential of the direct approach to living authors,⁵ giving literary scholars undue protagonism. The work of, for instance, *The Paris Review* (founded in 1953), with its iconic volumes of interviews with writers and its well-stocked website, categorically denies that the author is in any way dead, as do the many interviews given by writers to the media whenever they launch a new book, together with their presence, particularly of the younger generations, on social networks. Interviews, in short, are possibly the most important instrument to carry the author’s own voice into formal textual analysis and literary criticism, though they are not yet considered indispensable secondary sources.

To stress their importance, I’m quoting here diverse declarations that Robinson has offered in relation to *The Years of Rice and Salt*, among which the text published in *Locus Magazine*, an essay apparently based on interview questions elided in the final text that practically pre-empts with its thoroughness any scholarly analysis.⁶ In this article, Robinson shows his Jamesian credentials by declaring that “I’ve always been interested in history. I think of science fiction as being about the histories that we cannot know—future, alternative, deep past. These are all historical fictions. So, every time you write one you sketch out a kind of theory of how history happens” (January 2002: 6). The author mentions that he came up with the idea of erasing Europe from history in the 14th century twenty-five years before, coinciding with his publication of the short story “The Lucky Strike” (1984). In this story Captain Frank January, the bomber in the *Lucky Strike*

⁵ When I asked my PhD supervisor why literary scholars don’t talk more frequently with living authors instead of endlessly speculating about their texts, he declared very solemnly that “authors lie all the time.” I’m still baffled by his reply.

⁶ Robinson has a B.A. in literature from the University of California, San Diego (1974); an M.A. in English from Boston University (1975) and a PhD in English from UC San Diego (1982), earned with a dissertation on Philip K. Dick’s novels, initially supervised by Fredric Jameson and later by Donald Wesling. He is no stranger, then, to academic life and, within

crew that replaces the *Enola Gay* when it crashes during training, drops the atomic bomb that so appalls him on a bridge near Hiroshima instead of on the city, with fatal consequences for his own life but with a very positive outcome for human history. In the *Locus* text, Robinson states that he finally saw the chance to erase Europe in *The Years of Rice and Salt* a decade and a half later, though he does not say why that was the right moment. In our email conversation, Robinson mentioned that it had taken him three very intense years to write the novel, which sets the events that prompted him to start *Years* in 1998 or 1999. Robinson further explains in the *Locus* interview that he treated “each chapter as a sort of independent novella, linking them with the reincarnation of the characters” (7), and that he avoided having “real people survive in a reworked history” (7).⁷ Robinson, who describes himself as a “utopian,”⁸ explains that

I wanted this novel to suggest that the world could come to a positive balance in the long run, but I thought it would be naive and something like racism in reverse to suggest that if we got rid of Europe the world would have happily put itself together. There are all kinds of double binds in writing an alternative history. Do you make the alternative world better or worse? Either way it is unsatisfying, and yet if you make it exactly the same it becomes a pointless exercise. Something has to be said, and yet nothing you say can be adequate. That happens so often in this book that

it began to seem to me like nothing but a long set of double binds stop. (7)

The novel, as noted, was published in 2002 (on 3 June), but Robinson started writing it well before 9/11 2001, which is why he clarifies that

Writing *The Years of Rice and Salt* certainly wouldn't have been the same process after September 11th. It would have been odd to write some of the scenes I did. As it is, I did my best to understand Islam, work from within it when I was narrating it, and think of it as a force for good. But my natural inclinations, as some kind of self-invented California Buddhist, tended toward China. Many chapters are devoted to China, and I wrote the world war chapter from the Chinese point of view (7).

I turn next to his declarations in a round table (Dann, 2023) and four interviews (Gevers, 2002; Grant, 2002; Szeman, 2004; Snibbe, 2022). The round table organized and transcribed by Jack Dann, with a truly impressive list of participants, granted Robinson the opportunity to explain that the gap between the moment in the 1970s when he conceived of his point of departure and the time when he started writing *The Years of Rice and Salt* was caused by his lacking sufficiently solid skills as a novelist (in Dann, 2023: 102). Robinson declares that after writing the short stories “The Lucky Strike,” “Vinland the Dream” (1991)—which suggests that

it, to literary scholarship and criticism, though his fiction might suggest that his main interests are scientific.

⁷ There are real-life characters in *Years*, but it must be assumed that Robinson does not see his novel as a chance to mainly fantasize about their fate in a changed world.

⁸ Prettyman comments that “Like his subsequent Science in the Capital trilogy, *The Years of Rice and Salt* is a meditation on pre-utopian possibilities and conditions rather than a Utopia proper” (2011: 346). I support this view.

the Vikings' landing in North America is a recently fabricated hoax—and the novel *Years* (apart from the essay “A Sensitive Dependence on Initial Conditions” (1991) commenting on the first story), “I felt I was done with alternative history as a sub-genre” at least until “retirement,” when he might return to it “as a play” (69). He refers Dann to his 1991 essay for further comment because it “contains all my ideas about history and alternative history” (69).⁹ Both in “The Lucky Strike” and in *Years*, Robinson explains, his focus was a question: “what kind of people make historical differences?” (69). In *Years* “three character types (activist, conciliator, scientist)—that is to say, K, B and I—interact “to make things change” (69). Robinson further notes that the “change point in history” that he uses, the disappearance of the European population, “is the Largest Possible Change that the alternative history can handle!! That’s why I quit doing [alternate history] when I was done with that” (77, original capitalized initials).

In the interview with Gevers (2002), Robinson explains that reincarnation, which, as a Buddhist, he sees as “An obvious reality, right?” (18), was the literary device that allowed him to “to make a novel out of the anthology-like material without making it some kind of generational saga, which is a genre I don’t like” (18). Robinson clarifies that he is not approaching reincarnation “in the literal sense of an individual consciousness moving on” (18) but as a process of human recycling: “It’s a very powerful lens for seeing ourselves in time,

also for speaking the desire not to die, to live on. It took over the novel for me, and I loved it for that. Something has to take over, you see, to seize a project and carry it along” (18). In this interview, Robinson rejects Gevers’s supposition that the main trio are embodiments “of fundamental historical forces” or “the three vital components of progressive idealism as it acts upon history” (18). Instead, Robinson maintains, in a comment that recalls his criticism of my Science in the Trilogy chapter, that

“For me it was more just a matter of *characters as they grew through their actions*. I didn’t have a plan like the one you sketch out, although it is interesting to see it expressed that way. I think there is probably some truth to it, but for me it was an *instinctual matter only*; first a kind of Mutt-and-Jeff¹⁰ pairing of opposite temperaments, cheerful/angry, then the need for a third person who is neither, and so on” (18, added italics).

Years is presented as a text edited by an anthologist who has assembled the novellas into a novel, making them homogeneously Anglophone. Robinson denies that he is Old Red Ink, as the anthologist is known, and explains his origins and function:

His marginalia (this is how he got his name, and is how one of the marginalists of the [18th] Chinese novel *The Story of the Stone* by Cao Xueqin is identified

⁹ Robinson’s essay explores the events in “The Lucky Strike” using a variety of theorizations about history, seen as the result of countless individual choices: “Some powerful selection process, perhaps aesthetic, perhaps moral, perhaps practical (survival of the thinker), shoves to consciousness those plans that seem safest, or most right, or most beautiful, we do not know; and the choice is made. And at the moment of this observation the great majority of alternatives disappear without trace, leaving us in our asymptotic freedom to act, uncertainly, in time’s asymmetrical flow” (1991: online).

¹⁰ Robinson refers to the protagonists of the comic strip, see https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mutt_and_Jeff. Accessed 1 March 2026.

and named) appears on the left side of Book Six; right side marginalia is by a later feminist critic of his. These were ways of coping with or staving off insoluble problems of origin, translation, etc. The whole book has to be imagined *as translated into Chinese out of other languages; but why it is in English I have no idea*. In the end too much thought about these issues could drive me crazy so I just forgot about it (in Gevers, 2002: 18, added italics).¹¹

The interview by Gavin J. Grant, also from 2002, adds a few more pieces to the jigsaw of how *Years* was conceived and written. Robinson comments that in preparation for his novel, he read “mostly Chinese novels, and some Indian writing, and several books by Islamic feminists. Whatever seemed appropriate. One aspect of this project was that almost anything might become useful if it struck me so” (in Grant, 2002: online). His variegated readings resulted in an enhancement of the segments on Iran, the Iroquois (or Hadenosaunee), and the bardo, with China fascinating the author above other lands “because I knew so little about China before.” Robinson also integrated in his novel personal memories of the travels taken with his wife, Lisa Howland Nowell, in the 1980s: “We didn’t go that many places, but I made many of the places we visited settings in the novel, so that there were at least some places I was describing from my own experience” (in Grant, 2002: online).

In his review, Horton notes that “Indeed, though some of the discussions in the book weigh in against ‘Great Man’ theories of history, much of the actual historical change shown is clearly the result of ‘Great Men’ (and ‘Great Women’)” (2002: online). As he does in other interviews, Robinson insists to Gevers that he does not believe “in the Great Man/Woman theory, if you mean history being made by such people, with everyone else following along” (2002: online). Instead, he claims that in *Years* that there are no pre-ordained “historical actors” but “energetic people who will rise to the occasions history gives us. It’s more a matter of being at the moment when change is happening” in a “collective process,” which makes it “a bit random who takes the prominent roles in events.” Asked if he will continue writing about the same characters, Robinson replies in the negative: “They’ve had their say. That’s what makes finishing a novel sad; *the characters stop speaking*. The only solution is to start a new one. So, I’m on to a new group and a new novel” (in Gevers, 2002: online, added italics), in fact the first part of the *Science in the Capital* trilogy.

The interview with Szeman and Whiteman came one year after the release of *The Years of Rice and Salt* and is less focused on this novel. Robinson gave a thrilling talk at the 2003 The Futures of Utopia conference held at Duke University, which paid homage to Robinson’s mentor Fredric Jameson, also present as a keynote speaker. Szeman and Whiteman wished to explore their “conjunction” and

¹¹ Characters Zhu and Bao discuss Samarqandi Old Red Ink in a fun metafictional scene. This man “had collected the lives in his reincarnation compendium using something like the clinamen moment to choose his exemplars, as each entry in his collection contained a moment when the subjects, always reincarnated with names that began with the same letters, came to crossroads in their lives and made a swerve away from what they might have been expected to do” (649). Browsing through the collection, Bao remarks “I like the naming device” to which Zhu replies “Well, Old Red Ink explains in one marginalia that it is merely a mnemonic for the ease of the reader, and that of course in reality every soul comes back with every physical particular changed. No telltale rings, no birthmarks, no same names—he would not have you think his method was anything like the old folk tales, oh no” (649).

mutual admiration, and also to celebrate the tenth anniversary of *Red Mars* (1993). As regards *Years*, Robinson does not add much, but he insists that beyond China and Buddhism, “It was *the novel itself* that remained my foremost interest here, not any particular thematic strand in it—how to make it all work as a novel that readers would respond to” (in Szeman and Whiteman, 2003: online, added italics). He traces an interesting connection between *Years* and the Mars trilogy, noting that the Martian novels have “a large Islamic element in them, and so when I came to the alternative-history project, I was already aware that there was this other world culture that was huge and important and was not going to ‘westernize’ willingly, etc. So, the issue was on my mind through the 1990s.” Robinson comments that the alternative to Western feminism had to come from “a mercantile culture where women have lots of economic responsibilities, as in Qing China,” which is where he locates feminism’s alternative birth in *Years*. Regarding the complaints by reviewers that *Years* is both too close to actual history and too different to cohere, Robinson replies that “really one can’t win: alternatives to our world history are in some deep sense unthinkable. The alternative history then becomes an exercise in pushing at that limit and always asking ‘why’ to one’s responses concerning ‘plausibility’ or the like.” As Hennessy observes,

virtually all works of speculative fiction can be criticized for logical or internal inconsistencies, or the seeming implausibility of the world that they create, distracting from their intended message. But as incomplete or imperfect as they inevitably are, history and speculative fiction still both offer unique possibilities to question the seeming

inevitability of aspects of our current society, our current world (2022: 12).

The long interview with Scott Snibbe, actually a podcast, is offered both as a sound file and in transcription. Half an hour into the talk, Robinson comments on Buddhism, calling himself a Zen Buddhist who tries “to channel voices and then that’s why I’m a novelist” (in Snibbe, 2022: online). Robinson justifies once more his use of Buddhism, calling *Years* “an Asian narrative,” and noting that to work on reincarnation he had to take “a deep dive into Tibetan Buddhism, which had always seemed a little too elaborate and spacey and medieval, and indeed, over-concerned with reincarnation.” Again, he insists this was “a literary device,” showing surprise that his interest in Buddhism grew after *Years* (note that *Green Earth* is the title given to the omnibus edition of the Science in the Capital trilogy and Robinson’s scientist is Frank Vanderwal):

This is strange to say because *Years of Rice and Salt* is one of my favorite novels of my own, and it is very much of a Buddhist novel, but the Buddhism in it is not as close to my heart as the stuff that’s in *Green Earth*. A scientist, who’s very hardheaded, very skeptical, very empirical, very non-spiritual, listens to a lecture by an old Buddhist monk, a Tibetan, and he has that moment of Satori (in Snibbe, 2022: online, added italics).

Regarding the wiping out of 99% of the white group of population, Robinson notes that the basis of his alternative historical approach is materialism, which solved the problem of presenting the whites as either evil or superior: “Materialism would say no matter what humans were in control, the undercurrent

of scientific progress and social change would be somewhat similar.” The last chapter, set in the late 21st century, projects history into the future, hinting that utopia is happening at last, after the Long War replacing WWI and WWII that takes about one century and ends in a stalemate. “So that was my solution to the problem,” he explains, of how the world would evolve without white leadership: “it couldn’t be better, couldn’t be worse, couldn’t be the same. It could be utopian” (in Snibbe, 2022: online). And so it is.

After paying attention to what Robinson himself has said about *Years*, which certainly illuminates his novel in depth, I turn now to an analysis of the K character in its many iterations, seeking to illuminate how its rebelliousness contributes to utopia and to stress its role as the main axis of the novel’s optimistic discourse.

The K character: Permanent Rebelliousness and Utopia

As noted, Robinson claimed that the loss of white Christendom is “the Largest Possible Change that the alternative history can handle” (in Dann, 2023: 77, original capitalized initials). In fact, this is not necessarily the case. Collins points out in an essay on counterfactual history,¹² that several key turning points are ignored both by historians

and by speculative fiction authors, such as those referring to economic changes, manners, culture, organization, kinship structure, or “even gender roles” (2007: 249). Collins refers specifically to how “Some feminist thinkers reflecting on archeology have suggested that a turning point might have occurred early on if allegedly matrifocal family systems, with their accompanying female-dominated religious systems, had not been overturned by male-dominated patrilineal systems” (249). This is an allusion to the work carried out by Lithuanian-born US archaeologist Maria Gimbutas since the 1960s,¹³ by which she has claimed that aggressive nomadic tribes exported patriarchy from the steppes of Central Europe to the rest of the world, destroying in the process peaceful matriarchal agricultural societies of remarkable gender equality.

Gimbutas’s thesis has remained in the realm of speculation until recent DNA-related findings have demonstrated that migrating hordes of Yamnaya peoples originating in current Ukraine did disrupt agricultural societies in the Bronze Age. These cattle herders based their dominion on their taming of wild horses (they were the first humans to ride them), the wheeled cart, and the consumption of dairy products, which seems to have boosted their muscles and brains (see Wilkin et al., 2021; Trautman et al., 2023). Most importantly, the Yamnaya had a patriarchal social structure,

¹² Unlike alternate history, which is part of speculative fiction, counterfactual history is produced by historians and is part of historiography. See for a critique of this trend Evans (2014). In Book Nine, the K character, here Muslim feminist Kirana mocks counterfactuals as a “useless exercise” (*Years* 583). “These historians,” she adds, “who talk about employing counterfactuals to bolster their theories, they’re ridiculous. Because no one knows why things happen, you see? Anything could follow from anything. Even real history tells us nothing at all. Because we don’t know if history is sensitive, and for want of a nail a civilization was lost, or if our mightiest acts are as petals on a flood, or something in between, or both at once. We just don’t know, and the what-ifs don’t help us figure it out” (583).

¹³ See *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 7000 to 3500 BC: Myths, Legends and Cult Images* (1973); *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization* (1989); or *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe* (1991). Outside feminism, see, for instance, Anthony’s *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* (2007).

based on primogeniture, which pushed younger sons to seek military conquest. Young Yamnaya men trained to be warriors, a new highly respected status as confirmed by the findings in their graves. Their military conquests seem to be tied, besides, to the replacement of the male component of local populations: “In many places, indigenous male DNA disappears upon the arrival of the Yamnaya, while indigenous female DNA is traceable in the following generations. This suggests that the newcomers exterminated the men in the farming and hunter-gatherer populations they encountered, while incorporating the surviving women into their community” (Pancevski, 2025: online).¹⁴ Research by Harvard Medical School, led by David Reich, has demonstrated that today four billion human beings, one half of Earth’s population, carry in their genes Yamnaya DNA (Lazaridis et al., 2025).

The most extreme turning point in alternate history (or, rather pre-history), thus, would consist of imagining human life without the presence of the Yamnayans, something that, so far, not even feminist authors have contemplated. A number of feminist utopias imagine worlds without men and patriarchy, from Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915) to the new wave of androphobic speculative utopian fiction by women, including Lauren Beukes’s *Afterland* (2020) or Susan Newman’s *The Men* (2022).¹⁵ Yet, this type of fiction usually imagines a present or future crisis, rather than one set in the past. Significantly, the main bibliography on alternate history (Duncan, 2003; Gevers, 1997; Hellekson, 2013; Hennessey, 2022; Katsman, 2013; Raghunath, 2020) focuses

on male writers, without mentioning gender as a key issue or noting the absence of women from this sub-genre. Only Hellekson (2009) devotes some attention to Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975) as a controversial example of feminist alternate history.

None of the interviewers asks Robinson about the place of women in *Years*, but Jo Walton notes in her review that although “when I first read it I was so uncritically delighted that it existed that I was prepared to overlook anything,” she eventually noticed “how it’s very convenient” that the main characters are “mostly women only in good times for women” (2009: online). I don’t quite agree with Walton’s reading, since Robinson’s novel presents plenty of situations in which being a woman (or a disempowered man) is a clear disadvantage. What I have noticed is that the K character always resists the arbitrariness of patriarchy, as man, woman, or animal. Kneale notes that Robinson “does not use his counterfactual to show us a world without capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, or environmental crises” (2010: 301). In *Years*, he adds, “women are second-class citizens in many places in the Dar, and not much better within China. Everywhere conquered peoples are exploited, displaced and murdered” (301). Yet Kneale does not ask why this is the case.

For Pak, *The Years of Rice and Salt* gives “a sense of these civilizations’ development through the experiences of [the main] characters, whose struggle with *authority* in various guises is both a part of—and sometimes directly contributes to propel—the social changes depicted in each epoch” (2019: 48,

¹⁴ Citing Spanish scientist Íñigo Olalde, Ansedo (2018) reports that in the case of the Iberian Peninsula a Yamnaya invasion that took place 4500 years ago resulted in the total replacement of the Y chromosome carried by native men. See also Barras (2019).

¹⁵ See Newman’s own article for *The Guardian*, “The End of Men: The Controversial New Wave of Female Utopias” (2022).

added italics), a view I support. In fact, my thesis is that K's struggles against what Pak calls authority, and I call patriarchy, move the events forward until long overdue utopia appears on the horizon of human history. As Kneale notes, the K character in their incarnation as the (male) Kerala, the benevolent autocrat that rules progressive Travancore, exposes his ambitious utopian plans to a visiting scientist in what, I would add, possibly constitutes the core passage of the whole novel:

"This is the world we want you to help us make," he said. "We will go out into the world and plant gardens and orchards to the horizons, we will build roads through the mountains and across the deserts, and terrace the mountains and irrigate the deserts until there will be gardens everywhere, and plenty for all, and there will be no more empires or kingdoms, no more caliphs, sultans, emirs, khans, or zamindars, no more kings or queens or princes, no more qadis or mullahs or ulema, no more slavery and no more usury, no more property and no more taxes, no more rich and no more poor, no killing or maiming or torture or execution, no more jailers and no more prisoners, no more generals, soldiers, armies or navies, no more patriarchy, no more clans, no more caste, no more hunger, no more suffering than what life brings us for being born and having to die, and then we will see for the first time what kind of creatures we really are" (451).¹⁶

This idealistic man, however, is assassinated by his political opponents and his utopia dies with him, more than two centuries before the end of *Years*, whose narrative Robinson stops, anyway, before characters and readers can see "what kind of creatures we really are."

Wegner argues that "the fiery and impetuous" K often refuses the sound advice of the B character, exploding "into active rebellion in both the bardo and on the earth" (2014: 248). However, Wegner adds, "such a revolutionary fervor untempered by a longer historical vision risks burning itself out when confronted with repeated failures, ultimately cooling into the embers of despair and passivity" (248), as the B character complains in Book Four (248). A question that needs to be explored, then, is whether K's search for justice and utopia are frustrated, as Wegner defends, because of the character's limited historical vision, or by a tragic impossibility to free the world of an accursed pre-historic legacy, whether we believe this was caused by a dramatic change in our DNA (the Yamnaya effect) or, as K suggests in her incarnation as the Sultana Katima in Book Two, by an interested misreading of foundational religious texts originally aimed at bringing harmony to Earth. It's important to note, in any case, that the last sentence in *Years* is "Hello, my name is Kali," which the K character uses to introduce herself (once more) to the B character. I would like to believe that in this iteration she intends to destroy injustice for good and finally bring about the utopia that the Kerala describes.

I have already quoted Brooks in the sense that only a large-scale reading allows us to understand the trajectory of Robinson's

¹⁶ Miller complained in her review that "Some of Robinson's historical revisionism seems unduly Pollyanna-ish" (2002: online), particularly as regards his supposition that an international coalition of scientists could stop nuclear weapons from being developed or the Hodenosaunee rise without "adapting the social structures that industrialization seems to require." I see no problem in this or in the Kerala's declaration, finding this dreamy utopian attitude positive.

characters. To explore K's characterization, I must, therefore, trace its trajectory in the ten books. It should be borne in mind that K appears as fourteen different characters: eight male, five female and one animal (or five Chinese, four Indian, three Muslim, one African and one Native American), although, as I argue here, the weight of the anti-patriarchal discourse is carried by the two Islamic female incarnations, Katima and Kirana, as well as by the Chinese intellectual Kang. The problem I face is that the reader might feel that I am offering a mere summary of the plot, when I offer here a distillation of a particular line (K's) within it. In a way, then, the present work is doomed to make sense only to those who already know the novel and can appreciate that the section that follows is analytical commentary (which is why I insist on the main lessons that K learns and on its evolution in each book).

Watching children and adults at peace celebrating New Year's Day in the last scene of the novel and missing his late friend Kung, the old teacher Bao muses that there is always "in every group a Ka and a Ba, as in Old Red Ink's anthology" (668). The world, Bao thinks, "was changed by the Kungs, but then the Baos had to try to hold it together, baaing their way along. All of them together playing their parts, performing their tasks in some dharma they never quite understood" (668). In the end, what matters is not the reincarnation of the whole jati (constituted not by three but eight individuals, counting the main minor characters), but the recurrence of this basic human pairing, the fiery fighter and the loving sidekick, K and B, ready to resist the negative forces that prevent the world from being the good place it could be

if these forces did not exist. K learns across its many lives to leave an anti-authoritarian legacy, surviving mainly through her feminist texts and teachings, opposing patriarchy in China and in Dar al-Islam, and admiring the utopian miracle of the Hodenosaunee civilization. *The Years of Rice and Salt* functions as homage to K's stubborn, Quixotic reaction to injustice, mourning him or her whenever violence cuts his or her life short, and celebrating her legacy when she learns to survive even amid political chaos. Robinson's novel is an elegy for those who tried to make the world a better place, but were not allowed to do so by violence or repression, offering the hope that, if not their consciousness, at least their spirit can survive in the others that miss them when they are gone and that celebrate them when they are alive. Robinson focuses his hopes that utopia will finally emerge on his character K and so do his readers, as I show next.

In Book One,¹⁷ "Awake to Emptiness" (1-78), set in 1405,¹⁸ the K character is a young African boy, Kyu, sold as a slave to Chinese admiral Zheng He's treasure fleet. Kyu is brutally castrated and, accompanied by the first iteration of the B character, Bold, he manages to rise in the ranks of the powerful, sea-faring eunuchs led by the admiral in Zhu Gaozhi's court. Seeking revenge for his castration, Kyu schemes to bring down the Emperor, fanning the conflict between the eunuchs and the Confucian bureaucracy, which opposes He's plans for maritime expansion. Much concerned, Bold warns him that he can never succeed because the (patriarchal) imperial system is above the life of specific men. Rather than compassion for Kyu, Bold feels fear, as

¹⁷ The books are accompanied by maps drawn by Jeffrey L. Ward. Kneale finds them "both unsettling and helpful because of their uncanny resemblance to and difference from the maps and timelines we are familiar with" (2010: 98).

¹⁸ I'm relying on Mark Rosa's "Timeline for *The Years of Rice and Salt* by Kim Stanley Robinson" (2004: online), which compares the Islamic and Confucian calendars used in the novel with the Christian calendar.

“there was something scary in the hatred of a eunuch, something impersonal and uncanny” (*Years* 54). Kyu is, unsurprisingly, assassinated when the old Emperor dies, his son expels the eunuchs from his court, and Kyu taunts the imperial guard into action to oppose the new Emperor. Bold explains in the bardo the twin concepts of the jati and reincarnation, warning a reluctant Kyu to be less rash in his new life. Agreeing with Wegner, Willems notes that Kyu “is unable to focus, be calm and progress through the rings of reincarnation in the appropriate fashion” (2017: 184), a position that, in my view, callously disregards what Kyu has gone through and K’s subsequent unfair victimization in later periods.

Book Two, “The Haj in the Heart” (79-166), is subdivided into diverse sub-plots, with intervals spent in the bardo. In the first, set in Mughal India in the late 16th century, K and B resurface as the Hindu girl Kokila and the foundling Bihari. When Bihari dies, after miscarrying the child of Kokila’s abusive brother-in-law, she seeks revenge by poisoning this man and her father-in-law, both corrupt village leaders, only to be stoned to death as a witch. Since, to B’s dismay, K angrily rejects being punished for seeking justice, Kokila is reborn as an animal, the she-tiger Kya. In the next episode, Kya saves Persian Sufi mystic Bistami from being murdered by Hindus. When Kya sees Bistami’s older brother beat him up repeatedly, she kills and devours this vicious man, which leads to her third death, this time killed by the frightened villagers.

Still in the second book, Bistami, who ends up exiled in Al-Andalus after a spell in Mecca (he is exiled there by his former protector the Mughal Emperor Akbar), meets K again, this time as the Castilian-born, blue-eyed Sultana Katima. Together with her husband, the permissive and protective Sultan Mawji,

Katima founds the city of Baraka (in the site of the former French Bayonne), preaching a pro-feminist version of Islam. Again, the B character plays an ambiguous role, for he, as Bistami, admires rather than fully supports Katima’s position: “There was a lot of anger in there, hot anger, but Bistami had never seen such beauty” (143). Once widowed, Katima rules alone but she must abandon Baraka for Nsara (formerly Nantes, in France) when the Caliph of Al-Andalus sends an army to murder her, accusing her of witchcraft. This time Katima and Bistami survive long years, as they note in the bardo, which he sees as progress towards illumination, having, besides, somehow recognized each other. Bistami “had helped to create a religious legitimacy for this new thing, a queen in Islam” (164), and although she believes that what he calls progress is very limited, Bistami insists that “We recognized each other, you didn’t get killed—” (164). Full of enthusiasm, he insists that “We made a place where people could love the good. Little steps, life after life; and eventually we will be there for good, in the white light” (164).

The white light of utopia, however, is still centuries away. In Book Three, “Ocean Continents” (167-210), set in the early 17th century, K reappears as the Chinese Admiral Kheim, a former pirate. When, intending to invade Nippon (Japan), his fleet ends up adrift in the Pacific Ocean, he eventually reaches the Western coast of an unknown continent, where the Miwok natives live in peace. Kheim abandons the land hurriedly, trying to prevent the Miwok from being wiped out by the diseases his men carry (one, Peng, remains there with his Miwok wife). Together with the Miwok girl Butterfly, whom he fosters, Kheim comes across the Inka Empire, where both are almost sacrificed. She dies accidentally on the way back to China, which shatters Kheim. Years later, the

already dead, enraged Kheim tries to kill the goddess Kali in the bardo, for which Butterfly upbraids him in despair:

“I’ve seen a lot of people try. They lash out in fury and cut the hideous gods down, and how they deserve it—and yet the gods spring back up, redoubled in other people. A karmic law of this universe, my friend. Like conservation of yin and yang, or gravity. We live in a universe ruled by very few laws, but the redoubling of violence by violence is one of the main ones” (209).

Kheim accepts her lesson, but only reluctantly, still unable to control his rage.

In Book Four, “The Alchemist” (211-300), set in mid-17th century Samarqand (in current Uzbekistan), Khalid is an alchemist—punished by the Khan with the loss of his right hand for fraud—who becomes a scientist thanks to his son-in-law Bahram, a Sufi blacksmith, and their friend Iwang, a Tibetan Buddhist mathematician. Debunking in part Aristotle’s teachings, the three men come up with the scientific method, though all their many discoveries and their lives are lost when the plague decimates their city, most likely because the proud, obnoxious Khan disregards their advice to introduce urgent sanitary measures. In the bardo, Khalid taunts Bahram for being so focused on love instead of feeling anger at the lack of justice. Bahram criticizes Khalid for his inability to see the one god, Allah, rather than the many in the bardo, which further angers Khalid. The two men quarrel bitterly about who is not doing enough; Bahram blames Khalid for his “cynicism” (299), and he blames Bahram for his lack of initiative. When Bahram defends himself, invoking love, for “It’s easy to get angry, anyone can do that” (299), Khalid answers back: “I’m sick of love and happiness—I want

justice” (299). They reach a certain stalemate when Bahram promises to seek justice, which he does in the following book.

Book Five, “Warp and Weft” (300-335), set in the early 18th century, reveals that much has been happening in the continent across the Pacific Ocean, where the Iroquois, or, as they call themselves, the Hodenosaunee (People of the Longhouse) have survived the plague threatening them in Book Three. A former ronin samurai called Busho, who sails West after the Chinese conquer Japan, rises to the rank of Chief. Fromwest, as he is called by the tribe, understands through a sort of vision how Peng (his brother in a previous incarnation) saved the Hodenosaunee from smallpox through variolation (an ancient form of vaccination), and teaches his fellow citizens to resist the double onslaught of the Chinese colonizers from the West and the Muslims from the East. The B character, then, leads the initiative here, and brings justice and progress, while K appears as the Keeper who welcomes him into the community, “a man who had labored all his life to make this system work” (308). Fromwest admires the Hodenosaunee because, under their Keeper’s guidance, they have managed to find the right balance (here the sachems are the chiefs):

“Now, I have watched the Hodenosaunee as closely as a child watches its mother. I see how *sons are brought up through their motherline*, and cannot inherit anything from their fathers, so that there can be *no accumulation of power in any one man*. There can be no emperors here. I have seen how the women choose the marriages and advise all aspects of life, how the elderly and orphans are cared for. How the nations are divided into the tribes, woven so that you are all brothers

and sisters through the league, warp and weft. How the sachems are chosen by the people, including the women. How if a sachem were to do something bad they would be cast out. How their sons are nothing special, but men like any other men, soon to marry out and have sons of their own who will leave, and daughters who will stay, until all have their say. I have seen how this system of affairs *brings peace* to your league. It is, in all this world, *the best system of rule ever invented by human beings*" (320, my italics).

Utopia, then, exists, but Fromwest mission's is to warn the Hodenosaunee that both the Chinese and Dar al-Islam will try to overrun them. He advises them to form a league of nations and arm themselves, which partly protects them. Once in the bardo, K (as the Keeper) grants that Busho/Fromwest has done well, fulfilling the injunction to fight for "what was right" (*Years* 332), yet he suddenly announces his intention to destroy the place. The rest of the jati manage to calm Keeper but follow his lead in refusing to swallow the wine of forgiveness, thus preserving some memories of their ties and disobeying key Buddhist rules.

In Book Six, "Widow Kang" (337-409), set in 1770s China, the wealthy widow Kang Tongbi, a Buddhist woman in her fifties, rescues from poverty the monk Bao Ssu, who later dies in prison. Kang, who discreetly opposes the Qing dynasty, befriends Ibrahim ibn Hasam, a Hui Muslim scholar from Iran, hired to treat her because she sleepwalks and speaks in tongues (in fact recalling past lives and their jati). The couple eventually marry and move to Lanzhou in Western China, to live an intense intellectual life, which aims at cementing religious syncretism and allows Kang to develop

an early version of feminism. She is awakened to this line of thought by her reflections on the themes of the poetry that upper-class women are encouraged to write in China. Kang is focused above all on "the huge primal shock of being brought up as the precious pet of her family, only to be forced to marry, and in that very instant become something like a slave to a family of strangers" (381). Her other source of reflection comes from comparing Muslim and Chinese women, which leads Kang to conclude that the situation is worse for the former because they are illiterate. Kang advances so far in her poetry anthologies and feminist religious comparative writings that Ibrahim concludes "I have married one wiser than myself" (394).

The Chinese intolerance against Muslims and a flood almost kill the couple, yet they end up surviving many years. Following Kang's ideas, Ibrahim develops his theory of the Four Great Inequalities, establishing that the birth of patriarchy is the result of the surplus created by agriculture, which liberated some men from work to become warriors and priests. Ibrahim concludes that "Power has been exerted wherever it can be, and each successful coercion has done its part to add to the general inequality, which has risen in direct proportion to the wealth gathered; for wealth and power are much the same" (409). He also claims that history can only truly begin in a long-distant future: "All the inequalities must end; all the surplus wealth must be equitably distributed. Until then we are still only some kind of gibbering monkey, and humanity, as we usually like to think of it, does not yet exist" (408). Kang's reaction is a poem, which contains the lines "Something like anger fills my breast;/ A tiger: next time I will hitch it/ To my chariot. Then watch me fly" (409). K, in short, prepares to fight for utopian equality.

Book Seven, “The Age of Great Progress” (411-472),¹⁹ is set in the Indian state of Travancore, which is undergoing a period of technological advancement akin to the 19th century Industrial Revolution. Here, the K character, the ruler of Kerala of Hous, works with Muslim Armenian doctor Ismail ibn Mani al-Dir and with Bhakta, the abbess of the very advanced Travancori hospital, to bring progress. The “very handsome” Kerala (437), who is very proud of how his Indians ancestors shook off their Mughal masters, wishes to unify India and export democracy to the rest of the world, as noted, to form an international confederation. Unfortunately, as we learn from the following episode, set twenty years later, he is eventually assassinated. In this later and rather minor episode, Japanese slave Kiyooki, an inhabitant of Gold Mountain (a version of San Francisco), ends up joining a Japanese freedom movement sponsored by Travancore, with Ismail acting as a liaison, to honor the Kerala’s legacy and free the area from Chinese domination. The episode ends simply with Kiyooki’s Chinese friend, a young single mother of a baby called Butterfly, offering to help.

The next segment in Book Seven, which is non-narrative, explains that by the time WWI (1914-1918) started in our own history, in *The Years of Rice and Salt* the world was divided into four main powers: two are imperial (the fragmented Dar al-Islam, the far more cohesive Chinese Empire) and two democratic (the Hodenosaunee League and the Travancori League). Their fraught relationships lead inevitably to confrontation, and to a further delay in reaching utopia. Book Eight, “War of the Asuras,” narrates the Long War that unfolds along the equivalent of the whole 20th century.

The main trio reappear as Chinese men (Major Kuo, Private Bai, and Private Iwa), wondering how they have managed to survive five years of war. Kuo, who is quite critical of the Chinese Army, is soon vaporized by a Muslim shell. When Bai next sees him, Kuo insists that the three are dead and in the bardo. Eventually, the Chinese win a pyrrhic victory, in league with the Hodenosaunee and the Travancori. Kuo insists to Bai that all went wrong in a previous life when he was Kheim and Bai was Butterfly. He believes that the little girl’s death was meant to teach the lesson that a superiority based on weapons (this is how he freed her from the murderous Inkas) is always wrong. Kuo also argues that the ultraviolence of the Long War has killed reality itself, plunging the whole world into the bardo, though this is true only metaphorically.

The Years of Rice and Salt takes next a swerve into feminist territory. Book Nine, “Nsara” (507-616) returns to Sultana Katima’s old city, now an early 21st century cosmopolitan hub. When Idelba, a nuclear physicist, moves back to pursue her research, her niece Budur follows her, seeking to shake off the limitations of patriarchal Muslim life. Budur, who joins her aunt in an all-female commune, becomes the disciple and lover of feminist historian Kirana Fawwaz, an Algerine with combat experience who seeks to liberate Muslim women and blames Muslim men, particularly the clerics, for the defeat in the Long War. Kirana’s teaching takes inspiration from Katima’s ideas and she repeats similar lessons. For both women, Mohammed was a good man who sought to introduce fair government based on equality for all. However, Kirana argues,

¹⁹ This book offers the disturbing information that the Ottoman sultans have been breeding white women for their harem, for which they keep, logically, some white men enslaved. This has been going on for some generations. These white persons appear to be of British origin.

“(…) then came the caliphs, the sultans, the divisions, the wars, the clerics and their hadith.²⁰ The hadith overgrew the Quran itself; they seized on every scrap of misogyny scattered in Muhammad’s basically feminist work, and stitched them into the shroud in which they wrapped the Quran, as being too radical to enact. Generations of patriarchal clerics built up a mass of hadith that has no Quranic authority whatsoever, thus rebuilding an unjust tyranny, using frequently falsified authorities of personal transmission from male master to male student, as if a lie passed down through three or ten generations of men somehow metamorphoses into a truth. But it is not so” (*Years* 529).²¹

Kirana attributes the victory of the Chinese and their allies to the enforcement of women’s rights, and the defeat of Islam to its lack of respect for women as, being illiterate, they could contribute nothing significant to victory. This scandalizes her audience who, women and girls included, rush to report her to the male Muslim authorities, while Kirana expresses her admiration for the Hodenosaunee: “Here are our conquerors, a culture where women have power! I wonder if we could judge civilizations by how well women have done in them” (533). Kirana ends up proposing as a key research project “A history of women in the other cultures of the world—their actions as political creatures, their fates. That this is missing from history as we have been given it so far, is a sign

that we still live in the wreckage of patriarchy. And nowhere more so than in Islam” (534). Idelba, however, suggests that Budur studies first the material remains of women’s history. Kirana is not so keen, suggesting to Budur that what needs to be studied is the material everyday life of living women, following Kang Tongbi’s notions. The many books Kirana lends Budur also teach her about Katima. When Idelba dies of radiation poisoning, caused by her research on atomic energy, Budur, then an archeologist, starts an international movement to prevent all governments from developing nuclear weaponry, and to unify the eighteen communities into which the world is split (by real-life 2002, when *Years* was published). Kirana’s last act is helping to stop the radical Muslim coup that threatens Nasra, a coup finally prevented by the Hodenosaunee as she lies dying in hospital from cancer. In the bardo, Kirana is chagrined to find that reincarnation, a concept she adamantly rejected, is indeed real; as K, she declares herself too tired to try again, but accepts taking on one last life.

In Book Ten, “The First Years” (619-69), the K character is present in few scenes. Friends Bao Xinhua and Kung Jianguo almost succeed in their efforts to overthrow the Chinese imperial and colonialist government in the 2030s in favor of a socialist type of government. Kung is murdered and Bao becomes a nomadic diplomat eventually moving to Fangzhang (San Francisco). Travelling in Myanmar, Bao meets again Isao Zhu, a former revolutionary comrade, and together the two men attempt to make

²⁰ “Hadith: corpus of the sayings or traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, revered by Muslims as a major source of religious law and moral guidance. It comprises many reports of varying length and authenticity” (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hadith>). Accessed 1 March 2026.

²¹ In the *Locus* text, Robinson explains that “I read as widely as I could among Islamic women writers.” He names among them, Egyptian activist Nawal el Saadawi, Fatima Mernissi from Morocco and the Saudi novelist Hanan al-Shakh. They “give all their readers quite an education on their culture from the woman’s side of things,” but also “They make it clear it isn’t simple but that in essence they are struggling with a strong patriarchal culture stop” (2002: 83).

sense of history, debating the uses of studying it. In the list of unsolved issues that Isao compiles, he includes “Why does power corrupt?” (651), though perhaps the ultimate key question in *Years* is “How did the Hodenosaunee invent their form of government?” (652), so contrary to the patriarchal, power-based political systems dominating the rest of the world. Later, already an old man, Bao returns to Fangzhang to work as a history teacher near real-life Davis, California. He warns his young students that despite advances such as the creation of the League of All Peoples (following Budur’s campaigning in the previous book), and other efforts in favor of “the scientizing of the world, or the modernization, or the Hodenosaunee program” (660), in part resisted by the Muslims, human life is still in danger. The novel ends, as I have noted, on New Year’s Day in 87 (our 2088), when Bao spots “a striking young woman (...), a Travancori student he had not seen before, dark skinned, black haired, thick eyebrowed, eyes flashing” with “a profound skepticism” (669) about teachers, and she introduces herself to him as Kali, K’s final reincarnation.

The Years of Rice and Salt ends, then, in a moment of uncertainty, with the hope that K will finally destroy what is not needed and will build what is needed, after a long apprenticeship of eight centuries which constitutes the novel’s very core, as I hope to have shown.

Conclusion

Doing an exercise in critical autobiography to begin with, I have justified my wish to explore Kim Stanley Robinson’s novel *The Years of Rice and Salt*. I would not have faced such extensive, dense work without the author’s invitation. Given the paradox that this invitation arose from the author’s (gentle) annoyance at what he

considered to be my misreading of his Science in the Capital trilogy, I have chosen to pay attention to what Robinson has declared in the various interviews in which he referred to *Years*. By giving prominence to his voice, I strongly protest against the usual practice in current academic criticism of ignoring the author to depend instead on a theoretical framework that ends up separating not only the author but even the text from the central space it should occupy.

The problem is that, even after considering the author’s statements about his novel, *The Years of Rice and Salt* remains an indomitable text which does not lend itself easily to interpretation. According to Robinson himself, K is the character who gave him the necessary impetus to imagine what the Earth would be like without white Christian civilization. As I argue, it is K who, among all the characters, carries on his/her shoulders the weight of the process of understanding injustice and of demanding the justice that must lead to utopia. It is, therefore, necessary to explore what stages K goes through, though it can hardly be done without producing what could seem at first sight a mere summary of the sprawling plot.

The thread I’ve followed, from book to book, shows that K tends to fight against power with too much verve, ending up frequently murdered and thereby losing, in his incarnation as the Kerala, the opportunity to establish utopia, beginning with India. K leaves a lasting, deep mark as a feminist activist and thinker (as Katima, Kang, Kirana), but, somewhat disturbingly, her latest incarnation closes the novel by introducing herself as Kali, goddess of death and destruction (though also of feminine power). I could ask the author about this ambiguity, as I asked him about other characters, but I fear exhausting his patience and generosity. I depend, then, on myself to conclude that with all her rage and thirst for

justice, this human Kali could be the final solution to patriarchal rule, if she can finally integrate Bao's empathy and ability to love into her righteous anger.

Ultimately, the jati appears to be a McGuffin, since what seems to interest Robinson is the balance between K and B, between impulse and reflection, over their links with the third character, the researcher I. Of course, it could be argued that in Robinson's alternate history that balance is never achieved and Kali might cause its final disruption. My impression as a reader is that there is room for optimism, though this is not an opinion that I can support with a solid argument. I surrender, then, to Robinson's warning that creative processes in literature are emotional and not ideological. I also call for a return to emotion in academic literary criticism, while I hope that someone like the raging K soon brings utopia.

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