

Book Review

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Humanity's Precarious Perch: Existence and Ecology in Samantha Harvey's *Orbital*

Orbital

Samantha Harvey

Grove Press, 2024.

Samantha Harvey's Booker Prize-winning Novel *Orbital* is a space odyssey that explores the meaninglessness of human connections across infinite time and space. The journey of six astronauts orbiting Earth chronicles the International Space Station's activity over a single day as it completes sixteen orbits around the planet, carrying six astronauts from different parts of the globe. Their goal is to gather data by conducting experiments on themselves and on caged mice to understand how human bodies respond to extended periods in space. As the mission progresses, we learn more about each team member—their hopes, dreams, initial thoughts about the universe, and their separate lives back on Earth. Although they long for the familiar faces awaiting their return, an unusual attraction pulls them back to the spacecraft and the stunning view of Earth from space.

This is an ambitious and grand idea, and as a reader, one can appreciate the complexity of combining a realistic portrayal of modern space missions with lyrical language. These astronauts see Earth as a symbol of existence itself. While existentialism values humans above all philosophies it also stresses that existence is unique and personal to each individual. The novel begins with a somewhat critical view of being lost in one's thoughts and emotions, thousands of miles away from Earth. Harvey writes, "Rotating about the earth in their spacecraft, they are so together, and so alone, that even their thoughts, their internal mythologies, at times convene. Sometimes they dream the same dreams – of fractals and blue spheres and familiar faces engulfed in dark, and of the bright, energetic black of space that slams their senses. Raw space is a panther, feral and primal; they dream it stalking through their quarters." (Harvey 1)

These lines explore the idea of belonging when one is far from family. The astronauts dream of the familiar faces that are now distant. While they are eager to explore the unknown parts of space, they also feel a longing to return to the comfort of their personal lives. Space, as Harvey tries to depict in the novel, can be a fascinating but dark place where one might encounter silences unheard on Earth, a planet that feels like home but is also surrounded by the chaos of familiarity. During their space journey, the astronauts begin to appreciate the importance of silence found in the blackness of space. Earth, at the start of the novel, is portrayed as a mother figure comforting those who embrace her. It also appears to be waiting for the astronauts to come back, much like how a mother longs for her children's safety and comfort. The astronauts each have their own identities, nationalities, genders, colors, and creeds, but in space, these boundaries become blurred. They are no longer just from different continents on Earth, but in space, they are unified together in infinite space and time. The astronauts are alone, and even their dreams match the frequencies of the other. They no longer have the same sense of familiarity that they once had. The plot of the novel is fairly simple in its entirety. It follows the lives of six astronauts as they orbit the International Space Station. The sixteen chapters are marked as sixteen orbits, which include sixteen sunrises and sunsets. The Earth from the space station is their only source of hope, which provides them comfort and joy. It feels like a lover who is awaiting their beloved's return. Harvey, in this context, writes, "the earth is the face of an exulted lover; they watch it sleep and wake and become lost in its habits. The earth is a mother waiting for her children to return, full of stories and rapture and longing. Their bones are slightly less dense, and their limbs are slightly thinner. Eyes filled with sights that are difficult to tell." (Harvey 3)

There are six astronauts in the novel, each of them going through personal turmoil while at the International Space Station. One of the astronauts, while aboard the International Space Station, loses her mother and becomes an adult orphan. Chie's father had died a decade ago, and now she is left alone in the vast expanse of this infinite space. There is a sense of unexplained grief that she faces. Kaltman, in this regard, opines that although grief is a personal experience for each individual, there is sufficient

evidence to suggest that circumstances can alter our understanding of grief altogether. He writes, “It is also influenced by many factors, such as demographic variables, one’s relationship to the deceased, the cause of death, and sociocultural factors. As Chie is in space, it becomes nearly impossible for her to see her mother in human form one last time. Common features of grieving include sadness, shock and disbelief, a sense of longing for the deceased, pre-occupation with the loss, anger, guilt, and anxiety.” (Ivers et al.)

While in space, astronauts follow a routine of assigned tasks. Their grief and loneliness become part of their monotonous existence in space. There is also a sense of helplessness, as they feel unable to control what happens around them. The beginning of the novel, titled “Orbit minus one,” shows that they can only report the situation on Earth through photographs, but cannot alter the course of nature. Their powerlessness is evident when they see a typhoon forming over the Pacific Ocean and wonder about the destruction it might bring to people. The opening also sets the theme of isolation and the limits of human connection. The shared dreams and perceptions of the astronauts now seem to be merging in space, almost like a psychological convergence. Harvey, in this context, writes, “Sometimes they dream the same dreams- of fractals and blue spheres engulfed in the dark and of the bright energetic black of space that slams their senses.” (Harvey 1)

The raw, limitless expanse of space is compared with the image of a moving panther, which describes the unpredictable nature of the universe that the astronauts now inhabit. While these astronauts are working together as a unit, their connection with each other and with the Earth now seems to be a distant memory. They have limitless freedom, perhaps the existentialist freedom that Sartre talked about, but they are not free from their attachments back on Earth. This freedom does not give rise to any new thoughts or emotions but encapsulates them in a web of loneliness. An example of this can be found in the chapter title Orbit One Ascending, where the author highlights the idea of isolation. She writes, “Think a new thought, they sometimes tell themselves. The thoughts you have in orbit are so grandiose and old. Think a new one, a completely fresh, unthought one. But there are no new thoughts. They’re just old thoughts born into new moments – and in these moments is the thought: without that earth, we are all finished. We couldn’t survive a second without its grace; we are sailors on a ship on a deep, dark, unswimmable sea.” (Harvey 8)

In the same chapter, we find a reference to the painting by Velázquez called *Las Meninas*, translated as *Ladies in Waiting*. Shaun, one of the astronauts aboard the space station, keeps this painting in the form of a postcard given to him by his wife while he was training for his journey. This painting becomes an interesting point of conversation between the astronauts. Shaun also had learned about this painting as a lesson in school. The painting has continued to influence modern artists and painters. The painting becomes an interesting point of conversation for the astronauts and a core memory for Shaun, as his wife had written verbatim what their art teacher had told them about the painting years ago in

school at the back of the photograph. The interesting thing about the photograph is that it places the subjects, the painter, and the viewer in a complex interplay of perspectives and viewpoints. This shifting perspective mirrors the condition of the astronauts; while on Earth, they are at the center of their existence, yet in orbit, they transform into detached spectators, observing without engaging. Shaun's connection to the postcard illustrates his longing for the past and his increasing realization of how his viewpoint has shifted. Similar to how *Las Meninas* explores the concepts of visibility and perception, the novel highlights how the vastness of space modifies the astronauts' view of Earth. Ultimately, as they persist in their perpetual orbit, they, akin to the figures depicted in the painting, find themselves trapped between presence and absence, integral to something while simultaneously being apart from it. The postcard serves as an object of belonging for Shaun, which constantly reminds him of his wife. Shaun recounts how his wife remembers exactly what their art teacher had opined about Velázquez's painting years ago. He calls his wife the "sharpest and most lucid human he'd met." (Harvey 7)

As we progress further into the novel, it becomes evident that the astronauts develop a sense of belonging toward each other. Their bond with each other grows closer as they orbit the Earth in a metal unit. At first, they crave their families and earthly connections, but soon this distance becomes familiar. They start to feel at ease in their spacesuits while suspended in microgravity. The familiarity with Kevlar and steel tubes becomes a routine exercise. The idea of home is now eroding as they spend more hours in space. Time itself loses meaning with sixteen sunrises and sunsets in a day. Harvey writes, "At first on their missions they each miss their families, sometimes so much that it seems to scrape out their insides; now, out of necessity, they've come to see that their family is this one here, these others who know the things they know and see the things they see, with whom they need no words of explanation." (Harvey 12)

For Chie, who has recently lost her mother, grief feels distant as she watches Japan pass below and her home fading into a memory. She likens this to a game of musical chairs, where you keep moving regardless of the circumstances. While she is in orbit, her grief just continues to drift away. It's only when she returns to Earth that the feelings of loss and abandonment will overwhelm her. In the next chapters, the astronauts discuss how they might decorate the spacecraft to resemble an old Italian farmhouse or a Japanese house. These conversations remind readers of how the astronauts long for the small comforts they find on Earth. In the space station, their days are structured by routines. While Pietro studies microbes, Chie studies and grows her protein crystals. Shaun will observe the roots of the plants to observe the effects of the absence of gravity and light. Chie and Nell will monitor the forty mice they are conducting experiments on. Roman and Anton will continue to service the Russian oxygen generators and culture heart cells. The reference to the typhoon at the beginning of the novel is mentioned again as the astronauts are asked to take pictures and report the weather conditions from the spacecraft. They soon realize that they are distant and no longer in sync with the earthly rhythm. They

do not have the same freedom they had back on Earth. Now their lives are restricted to the same routines. The only choice they have is perhaps what they would like to eat. Nell contemplates the strange freedom they have as astronauts. She says, “This is a strange thing, it seems to her. All your dreams of adventure and freedom and discovery culminate in the aspiration to become an astronaut, and then you get up here and you are trapped, and spend your days packing and unpacking things, and fiddle in a laboratory with pea shoots and cotton roots, and go nowhere but round and round with the same old thoughts going round and round with you.” (Harvey 18)

Although the astronauts are not each other’s real family or the ones related by blood, they still are vital to each other’s survival aboard the space station. They find the same comfort and warmth that they once found with their family members. The space station is carefully monitored and maintained, ensuring its safety at all times. However, this also makes them realize that maybe upon their return, they feel more vulnerable to the dangers that exist on the earth. The momentary safety and comfort make them more distant from the vulnerabilities that make us more human. Their bodies, which now feel younger owing to the absence of gravity, make them anew to the human experiences of pain and suffering. Nell, who receives an email from her brother informing her that he has caught the flu, makes her realize that this absolute wellness and rejuvenation are not permanent and will fade soon as she returns to Earth.

Although the novel is not an explicit attempt at writing a climate fiction treatise, it does comment on the power of nature and how man only succumbs to it. With the progress made over the years in the domains of science and technology, we can predict the forthcoming disasters, but only do so much to prevent them. This asserts the underlying theme of nature’s power and indifference. The Earth existed long before the advent of sapiens and humans and will continue to exist even when they no longer exist. The law of nature is universal and does not spare anyone, even the ones who are miles away from the planet. The writer has meticulously compared the astronauts to a fortune teller who predicts the advent of the typhoon but can do nothing to prevent the damage it is going to cause. She writes, “They have no power – they have only their cameras and a privileged anxious view of its building magnificence. They watch it come.” (Harvey 24)

The astronauts in the following chapters also discuss the potential damage that orbit could cause to their bodies. They are just as much test subjects as the samples they observe under microscopes. While they might feel younger here, they all understand the reality that when they return, they will have aged five to ten years more than the average person on Earth. There is also a sense of hopelessness that the astronauts feel. While for many years we have believed that the Earth is at the center of the Universe, it is only a belief we create to comfort ourselves. Earth, when viewed from infinite space, is just another planet on the sidelines of the Universe. From space, Earth shines with such brilliance and beauty that it’s hard to accept its insignificance. Although it’s recognized that Earth is just one of many planets,

from this perspective, it appears to hold a special place. Humans have launched many missions into space to explore the possibility of life on other planets, especially Mars, but till now, there have been no recognizable signs of life on other planets. Probes such as Voyager transmit messages from Earth into the vast unknown, hoping to establish contact that may ultimately never happen. If extraterrestrial life exists, it has yet to make its presence known, and as the silence continues, humanity increasingly faces the reality that we may be alone in the universe.

Orbital is not just a journey through Space or a voyage to capture photographs about the possibilities of new life. It is a reflection on the damage and destruction caused by humans on Earth, which is the only possible source of life. Although the author has never claimed it to be an explicit attempt to write a science fiction or a climate fiction novel, the themes resonate with both genres. In one of her interviews, Samantha Harvey mentioned, “I wanted to write about our human occupation of low earth orbit for the last quarter of a century – not as sci-fi but as realism. Could I evoke the beauty of that vantage point with the care of a nature writer? Could I write about amazement? Could I pull off a sort of space pastoral? These were the challenges I set myself. (“Everything you need to know about *Orbital* by Samantha Harvey, winner of the Booker Prize 2024”)

The novel places the Earth as a fragile planet slowly being eroded by human actions. The references to wildfires, eroded coastlines, and the surface of the atmosphere are visibly destroyed by pollution. The astronauts are aware that the planet has been marked by irreversible damage caused by human activities. The technology that enables them to conduct experiments in space is the same technology that has led to the planet’s degradation. There is a feeling of power and powerlessness that prevails throughout the course of the novel. The novel also comments on the nihilistic nature of time, which moves on with or without humans. Wendy Smith, a critic from the Boston Globe, has rightly encapsulated the essence of the novel. She writes,

Samantha Harvey’s meditative novel portraying life aboard a spacecraft contains on almost every page a sentence so gorgeous that you want to put down the book in awe. In the first two paragraphs, which introduce us to six sleeping astronauts, we find: “Raw space is a panther, feral and primal; they dream it is stalking through their quarters”; and, “Outside the earth reels away in a mass of moonglow, peeling backward as they forge towards its edgeless edge.” There are no big personal conflicts in *Orbital* and only two notable events, which both take place below them on Earth, but the sense of wonder and delight conveyed by Harvey’s elegant prose and philosophical musings make this a deeply pleasurable book for serious fiction lovers. (Smith 2)

The existentialist theme in the novel reminds us as readers that life on our planet is the one that gives us hope. We might celebrate our technological advancements, particularly the advent of Artificial

Intelligence, and how it makes life accessible just at the click of a button. However, we must not forget to value the smaller joys that we can experience while life still exists on the planet.

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