


## The Cosmic Intimacy and Planetary Consciousness in *Orbital* by Samantha Harvey

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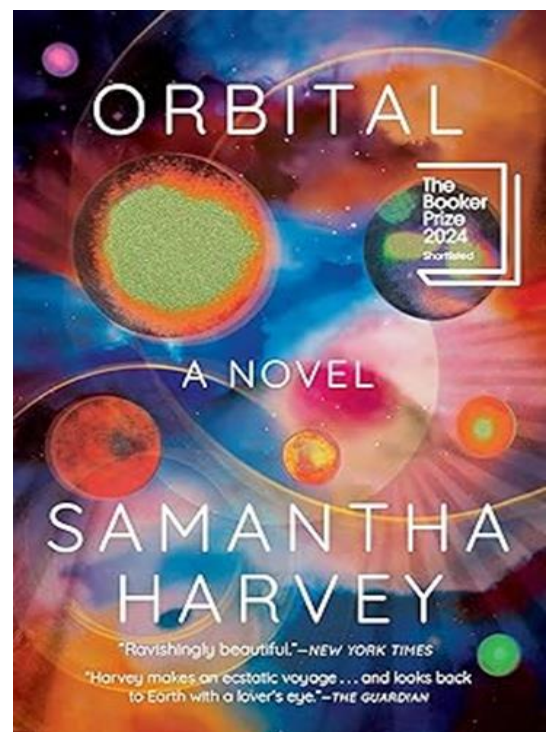
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Samantha Harvey has already made a name among the widely read and unconventional storytellers of modern British fiction, with her delicacy of psychological perception, lyrical accuracy, and philosophical exploration of human life. Her novels always transcend the conventionality of narration and penetrate the landscape of consciousness, memory, perception and existential reflection. Through her novels, like *The Wilderness*, *All Is Song*, *Dear Thief* and *The Western Wind*, Harvey has shown an uncommon literary skill of turning the most average of human experiences into deep philosophical speculation about the nature of time, death and identity. The bodily genius is extended in her 2023 novel *Orbital*, which has been the winner of the 2024 Booker Prize, by moving the object of contemplation not to the interior of the human but to the exterior of the planet. *Orbital* not only gained international attention as it received a highly regarded award, the Booker Prize in



2024, but also due to a bold new formal device in modern fiction. The novel takes place on the International Space Station on one day and follows six astronauts through the day, experiencing 16 sunrises and 16 sunsets as they orbit the Earth 16 times. Instead of depending on dramatic plot action, Harvey produces a meditative and poetic narrative that turns the cosmic into the personal and the remote into the

profoundly personal. She has called the novel a space pastoral, which is the best term to explain its meditative form and ecological outlook.

In contrast to classical science fiction, *Orbital* is not about future technology or alien discovery. Rather, it explores the delicate connection between humans and the Earth by placing the planet in a new position as an object of study and emotional focus of the story. The novel offers a wounded world as viewed through the air-beautiful, borderless and vulnerable, but at the same time it challenges the human assumptions of control, ownership and permanence. *Orbital* provides one of the most creative literary answers to modern ecological panic and planetary awareness through its philosophical richness and literary flair.

#### Plot Overview

*Orbital* has a plot that is exceptionally sparse but has a far-reaching implication. The whole story is set in twenty-four hours in the International Space Station, and six astronauts of various nationalities and cultures are living their everyday life up in space, orbiting the Earth sixteen times a day. They work out, make scientific observations, call home on Earth, and think about their life, but below all these normal activities is a broader meditation on

existence. The station is a floating world, one that is not in touch with normal life on the earth but is in touch with it intensely by means of memory and perception. In space, political boundaries are washed away, countries are torn apart and submerged in seas and deserts, and human boundaries are trifled against the enormity of planetary life. Earth is not represented as a landscape but as a living being, vulnerable, beautiful, yet more and more threatened by the climate crisis. Hurricanes, melting glaciers, and burning forests are seen not as something sensational, a disaster, but as silent observers.

*Orbit* as a whole is reflected in the rhythm of the novel. There is no traditional resolution or dramatic struggle, but rather, repetition turns into revelation. There are “sixteen sunrises and sixteen sunsets” that break the normal human chronology and instead of linear development, cyclical awareness. The astronauts are neither moving nor still, neither at home nor in exile, neither scientific nor spiritual. Harvey turns the banal into ritual, and the station is nearly monastic- a place of contemplation perched above the troubled Earth beneath. Earth is the real protagonist of the novel rather than any of the astronauts. Harvey diverts the focus of the narration to the vulnerability of the planet

rather than the heroism of a person. This is the ultimate accomplishment of the novel: by putting humanity in a distant position, she achieves the opposite, and finally, the closeness to Earth is rejuvenated.

### **Character Development**

The characterization of Harvey in *Orbital* is an attempt to oppose the norms of psychological realism. The six astronauts are not built as stereotypically dramatic heroes with a far-fetched back story or personal issues. Instead, they serve as a collective testament, symbolizing a variety of experiences of human life and not personalized narrative hubs. Every astronaut brings with him or her his own memories, emotional desires, and silent existential doubts. They envision those families they leave behind, ageing parents, failed relationships and the unfamiliar loneliness of life in between the earth and space. But Harvey is averse to melodrama. They are quite emotional, reflective and not active, observant and not confrontational. This has been considered a strength by some critics who feel that the characters are abstracted and are not distinct.

Nevertheless, this seeming shortcoming is at the core of the philosophical design of the novel. Harvey deliberately denies the preeminence of individual subjectivity in that the novel is a decentering of the human

self. The astronauts are not heroes who have been able to conquer space; they are just temporary containers of perception that have relevance in their capability to observe the planet beneath. This posthuman view is a challenge to anthropocentrism. The identity of a human being is not abolished but relativized. To make the Earth bigger, the characters are made smaller. This is the reason why their emotional lives are important; they are placed in a bigger planetary context. Characterizations in this respect is an ethical act: the novel encourages the readers to reevaluate the importance of humans not through their superiority, but their modesty. The commonality of the condition of the astronauts also points to the case of universal vulnerability. The national identities are there, yet at the level of orbit, nationalism is ridiculous. Only a weak common humanity, reliant on the same atmosphere, the same planet, and the same insecure future, is left.

### **Various Themes**

Planetary consciousness- The realisation that human existence cannot be explained without ecological interdependence is the main theme in *Orbital*. Harvey does not introduce the Earth as the background scenery but as the main emotional and philosophical power of the novel. The fact

that the astronauts are further away from the planet does not bring about a sense of detachment but rather enhanced belonging. They do not leave Earth; they know how much they are a part of it. Going hand in hand with this theme is the theme of ecological fragility. The story is colored with climate anxiety, although Harvey does not indulge in an end-of-the-world spectacle. She provides environmental awareness instead of disaster fiction. Storms drift with sickening beauty, continents are bright in brittle silence, and icecaps are receding under the eyes of people who can only look on. This silent sorrow is stronger than a catastrophe.

**Criticism of Anthropocentrism-** The other theme of great importance is the criticism of anthropocentrism. The conventional accounts of space exploration tend to glorify conquests and human dominion over nature. However, *Orbital* dismays this triumphant fantasy where space is not shown as an edge, but as a viewpoint. Orbit is indicative of a non-possessive relation, a geometry of humility. Humanity is in an orbit around the Earth, and is not over it.

The concept of the 'Sixteen Sunrises' and 'Sixteen Sunsets'- Another important thematic concern is time. The repetition of the sixteen sunrises and sunsets challenges the normal chronology and brings about

cyclic consciousness instead of linear. Time becomes ritualised, virtually sacred. The routine of science turns into spiritual contemplation, and the novel approaches philosophical meditation more than traditional fiction.

**The binary of isolation and intimacy-** There is also isolation and intimacy that exist throughout the text. The astronauts are isolated physically but linked to the world down there emotionally. Distance intensifies affection. Families, memories, and mundane details of the earth acquire a more emotional quality, specifically due to their absence. Harvey demonstrates that belonging is frequently explicated by separation.

Finally, the novel discusses the moral and philosophical need for humility. Viewing the planet Earth in space is to face the fallacy of man at the centre. Such a realization does not lead to despair; it leads to responsibility.

### **Writing Style**

One of the most artistic accomplishments of the novel is the way Harvey wrote it, *Orbital*. Her language is lyrical, meditative, and rhythmically accurate, forming a narrative texture that seems to orbit itself, circular, reflective, and quietly transformative. Instead of a rapid motion or dramatic force, the novel relies on slow

mindfulness and philosophical profundity. Her sentences usually serve as poetic meditations returning over and over again to the images of oceans, storms, light and silence. This repetition is not repetition but form. The prose loops around like the station around the Earth, around the concepts of mortality, beauty, and fragility, until they attain a spiritual resonance. The language is full of sensuous detail but still suppressed and strict. The descriptions of the Earth by Harvey are vivid. She changes the visual perception into the moral and renders beauty indistinguishable from vulnerability. The storyteller is non-hysterical, thoughtful and inward-looking. It is not that there is much dialogue or that the dramatic conflict is traditional at all, but the dramatic intensity is achieved through perceiving. Her style too bears some traces of the modernist interiority, especially the preoccupation of Virginia Woolf with consciousness and time fluidity. But Harvey takes this inwardness out toward the planetary awareness. The outcome is a prose architecture that is intimate and cosmic.

The slow, meditative pace might be taxing to some readers; nevertheless, this very slowness is the key to the originality of the book. *Orbital* does not demand speed, but

demands attention, and in an age of distraction, it is a radical literary gesture.

### **Critical Reception**

*Orbital* got unprecedented international praise, which eventually saw it being named the winner of the 2024 Booker Prize. It was the first Booker-winning sci-fi novel and one of the shortest novels to win the award. The Booker judges hailed the piece as being beautiful and ambitious, and a deep contemplation of a wounded world as an observer. The formal innovation and philosophical courage of Harvey were greatly admired by the critics. Several critics pointed out how the novel is able to convert ecological awareness to literary experience without the use of traditional climate fiction tropes. Its own approach to the environmental crisis and not disaster was regarded as one of its most novel advantages. The ‘space pastoral quality’ of the novel was also acclaimed, a term that Harvey herself refers to the novel as having. Such a mixture of cosmic setting and pastoral sensibility enabled critics to place the novel beyond the standard science fiction and closer to literary modernism and ecological philosophy. Its international acclaim bears witness to the idea that modern literary culture continues to appreciate fiction that is thought- and

perception-focused, as well as morally imaginative, rather than spectacle-driven.

#### Summing Up

Orbital by Samantha Harvey is a stunning addition to the world of twenty-first-century literature, as it shows that the novel is still a strong tool of philosophical and ecological investigations. Moving the story focus off human drama and onto planetary consciousness, Harvey reinvigorates the capabilities of modern fiction and presents a very novel and deeply original consideration of life in the post-climate crisis era. It is the radical seriousness of attention that makes the novel successful, not dramatic action. It shows the readers how to view the earth afresh, not as a land to inherit, but rather as a vulnerable totality to take care of. The astronauts do not conquer space but learn humility before the planet where they live.

Harvey has turned orbit into a metaphor, ‘a circulation of relation that is not domineering, a circulation of intimacy that is not possessive’. In such a symbolic association, *Orbital* questions the anthropocentrism and welcomes a posthuman ethical imagination based on responsibility, not control. The poetic prose of the novel, philosophical delicacy, and ecological urgency are worthy of the Booker Prize nomination and guarantee the

establishment of this novel among the most significant literary works of recent years. It is not just a space novel but a novel that will transform our perception of our location on this planet. Indeed, *Orbital* is a moving and bright literary masterpiece, an expression of the frailty of the human condition and the perseverance of wonder. It proves Samantha Harvey to be among the greatest modern novelists who write today. This is not just memorable work but a necessary one because of her skills in combining beauty and ethical seriousness. *Orbital* reminds us in an age of ecological uncertainty and cultural fragmentation that literature can still make the consciousness big. Maintaining attention is a kind of care, and attending to the planet starts with how to see it.

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<https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/books/orbital>

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