



Book Review

Orbital Contemplations

Samantha Harvey. *Orbital*. Vintage, Penguin Random House, 2024, p.136, ISBN:9781529922936, Paperback, ₹ 499.00.

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Orbital, the Booker Prize winning novel by Samantha Harvey, traces the vacant dome of space harbouring the scientific dreams of four astronauts and two cosmonauts aboard the International Space Station as they methodically organise their lives around the requirements of the expedition- mainly collection of meteorological data. Shaun, the American astronaut, fixedly navigates the boundaries of his understanding of a Universe sired by a benevolent God. His anchor is one of faith. Nell, who is English, is given to meditative contemplation as she scans the geography of the Earth, unable to grasp the optimism for faith that Shaun demonstrates. Chie is faced with memories of her Japanese upbringing, and has only just come upon the news of her mother's death. Pietro, an Italian, is mostly self-contained, having drifted into a state of natural composure by repeated missions to the I.S.S. The Russian cosmonauts, Anton and Roman, demonstrate remarkable dexterity and an emotionalism that animates their mechanical existence.

This work of deep philosophical contemplation and self-introspection is divided into sixteen chapters, depicting a day's experiences of the astronauts unfolding in sixteen sunrises and sixteen sunsets aboard their spacecraft rotating around the

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earth, about seventeen and a half miles per hour. The solemn, almost meditative quality of its prose is deeply transformative—in that it elevates the scientism of the subject matter into the warmer poetic sensibility, so much so that the lyrical and rhythmical quality of the prose itself becomes particularly striking. At the author's hands, the work evolves into profound intelligibility, and grounds our abstruse imaginings of space into a concrete shape of remarkable possibilities. *Orbital*, as it traces the solidity of the Universe, accounting for the physical features with the precision of a topographical survey, unfolds as an experience to be felt differently by people. Additionally, it does not so much as condense itself into a well-specified and reasoned argument, but spreads over an entire landscape, being simultaneously scraped off and brought into existence. The poetic prose projects a delightful ambiguity of the linearity of the narrative, mimicking a serpentine movement, and transporting its readers to the chasmic depths of experience. The language and style achieve well in terms of the suggestiveness of everything it touches—tangible or abstract. The narrative, though deviating from a conventional plot structure, illuminates the very experience of reading with its emotiveness and profundity of perception.

Deprived of any earnest human interaction, the monotony of existence seems to sweep over the astronauts in the confined dimensions of the capsule, “They are so together and so alone” (1) with the contemplation as vivid, and gentle as a paradox could ever be; a sense of calm verging on the existential only because it must, in the “black of space” (1). It is a lengthy timeline—nine months, as if to endure again the natural period of gestation. They waver into an introspective meaning-making activity, experience in redoubled intensity the strain of relationships, or grief over death, out of the sheer incompetence of their faculties to bring it to resolution—Personal relationships thought about, but not meddled with, emotions pondered over, but not tackled. Now and then they hold their

cameras into action. It is almost from the vantage point of a seer that they capture the roundness of the earth, its idiosyncrasies and variations— a tender outlook of someone who regains the familiarity of his land after a prolonged absence. From a distance the earth is thought about more endearingly— a mother, a lover, or heaven— beyond its presumed location and now at the centre of their vision. “The earth, from here, is like heaven” (9).

Of remarkable distinction is the sheer literariness of the work which draws much attention to the craft as to the truths of science that, in a narrative of pure scientism, would have lacked the lucidity of the literary scholar. It is the winding strength of the narrative as against the taut manner of objective reckoning which forgoes the gentle versification by which language unfolds in the smooth texture of satin, and becomes a reiterative act of sublimation into rhythm. Additionally, the careful use of literary devices aids the narrative. For instance, paradox heightens meaning— it illuminates the resonance of a Universe with the individual capacity to be somewhere in between obliteration and regeneration. The rampant use of metaphors, oxymorons, alliterations not only make the prose highly poetic, flowing and rhythmical, but are in direct congruity with the astronauts’ experiences of the changing forms, colours and contours of the earth as they witness it from their capsule to be passing through conflicts of different nature and to be possessed by a force that marvels in two completely different aspects of being. The feral quality of space, thereafter, concretizes experience.

One of the very interesting and striking features of the book is the diagram of sixteen orbits of the Earth which the novelist provides in the beginning of the book which attracts and guides the reader to make sense of the movement of the capsule around the earth. Harvey’s style recalls the poetic spirit of the Romantics, displaying a fruitful balance of emotional, imaginative and meditative intensity with a deep regard for the

objective truths of nature. It's a seamless continuity of one feeling into another partaking in the general human condition, even in the face of a mission that might just as well be experienced and recounted in factual detail. Notably, the book invites interaction, reflection and meditation over our relationships- relationship with people, with our Earth, environmental degradation, artificial lines dividing us, and even feminist issues!

However, the narrative style, language and unconventional plot structure which lends beauty to the novel is also its limitation. Looking for the conventional thread of a narrative, we are consumed by its waywardness, where every attempt at symmetry only begets a constant piling of density upon density. Harvey seems to have overdone it, disrupting the natural into absurdity. Characters too, not well developed, partake in the surrealist character of the plot. However, taking in view the philosophical and meditative strain of the novel, characters are not required to be so. The novel has an open ending, rightly so, depicting the cycles which the astronauts must undergo repeatedly.

Orbital can be a wonderful read for those who appreciate and enjoy poetic, meditative and philosophical prose and don't hanker after facts, reflecting Keat's 'Negative Capability'. It is for those who marvel at the literary style which flows in perfect harmony with the meditative theme even if the novel is so scientific as to be about six astronauts in the space in a capsule!