IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)
Volume 31, Issue 10, Series I (October, 2026) 101-105
e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISSN: 2279-0845.
www.iosrjournals.org

Earth as the Only Centre Plotless Realism and the Language Paradox in Samantha Harvey's *Orbital*

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Orbital is a Booker Prize-winning novel by Samantha Harvey, a novel that is radically different from "plot-driven" books. The novel is set entirely in sixteen orbits around the earth in a single 24 hours on the International Space Station, and tightens up the stream of consciousness of six astronauts in the face of the cosmos. In this paper, the 'language paradox', the basic dilemma between the limits of language and the unparalleled sensory experience of watching Earth from space, is explored as a way of understanding Harvey's approach. This year, the author's research has been expanded to examine the structural rhythm and phenomenological texture of the novel to show how Orbital explores the "problem of the real," asks how human consciousness can be anchored in meaning when free from terrestrial gravity. In conclusion the paper suggests that Harvey's orbital gaze is not one that abstracts humanity from the planet, but one that seems to reject cosmic anthropocentrism, re-establishing Earth as the only indispensable and central subject of humanity and moral accountability.

Structure

Harvey shapes her novel around a striking manipulation of time, most clearly seen in how she compresses and alters the experience of a day. On Earth, people are used to the ordinary rhythm of one sunrise and one sunset, which neatly divides the day and gives a sense of order to daily life. However, for those living on the International Space Station, this rhythm is completely transformed. The astronauts witness the sun rise and set sixteen times in a single day on Earth, as each orbit lasts only ninety minutes. This constant cycling of day and night breaks away from the usual sense of time and forces both the characters and the reader to adjust to a new, unfamiliar pattern. This repeated cycle of artificial days unsettles both the bodies of the astronauts and the flow of the story itself. The usual rhythms that guide sleep and waking become meaningless, and the narrative does not move forward in a straight line. Instead, time in the novel loops and circles back on itself, so that the boundaries between past, present, and future blur. Harvey uses this sped-up sense of time to create a feeling of disorientation, making the reader aware of how much our sense of time depends on familiar routines. As the usual markers of time disappear, the characters lose some sense of themselves, drifting in a space where the only constant is the turning of the Earth below. In this way, time in the novel is shown to be something flexible, shaped by circumstance rather than fixed and unchanging.

Plotless Realism

Samantha Harvey, in Orbital, chooses to move away from the usual reliance on spectacle or crisis that often shapes stories set in space. The novel lacks a traditional plot, as it avoids the usual structure of a hero's journey and instead maintains a steady, atmospheric tone without clear turning points. Instead of building her narrative around dramatic confrontations or disasters, she focuses on what might be called Plotless Realism, in which the story is limited to the everyday routines and procedures that make up life on the International Space Station. There are no external threats or sudden disruptions; instead, the monotony and discipline of the astronauts' daily lives are brought to the forefront. This approach highlights how their existence is shaped not by extraordinary events, but by the constant repetition and order that spaceflight demands.

Harvey pays close attention to the small details of life in space, such as the constant background noise of machinery and the repeated performance of scientific tasks. This focus on the ordinary aspects of space habitation shows a commitment to portraying the reality of the International Space Station as it is actually lived. The astronauts are not shown as heroes facing a crisis, but as individuals whose lives are defined by routine and the need to maintain order. The monotony of their environment mirrors the stillness and isolation of orbit, and it is

this discipline and repetition that become central to their survival. Without dramatic events to drive the story, the novel asks the reader to consider the importance of the everyday, where even small changes in mood or brief moments of reflection take on greater significance. In this way, the novel becomes less about what happens and more about what it means to exist within a world governed by routine, especially in such an extreme and isolated setting.

Stream-of-consciousness

Samantha Harvey's narrative technique in Orbital can be situated within a literary genealogy that finds its roots in the modernist innovations of Virginia Woolf, whose pioneering exploration of interiority and the stream-of-consciousness mode not only established a new paradigm for narrative form but also set the stage for subsequent writers to interrogate the complexities of consciousness and subjectivity within their own works. By employing the stream-of-consciousness technique, Harvey positions Orbital within a lineage that includes canonical works such as *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Waves*; however, she recontextualises these modernist concerns by embedding them within a world defined by technological mediation and the profound spatial dislocation of life aboard a space station, thereby inviting a reconsideration of how interiority is shaped and destabilised by the conditions of contemporary existence. In *The Waves*, Woolf constructs a narrative architecture in which six distinct voices are woven together, their subjectivities merging into a single, rhythmic current that mirrors the cyclical movement of the sea itself. Harvey echoes Woolf's conceptualisation of the self as an element of a broader collective consciousness and foregrounds the dissolution of the individual ego under the relentless pressure of repetition and routine, suggesting that identity itself becomes contingent and unstable in such a context. *Mrs Dalloway* is structured around a single day, a narrative constraint that allows Woolf to delve into the psychological and historical layers that constitute her characters' interior worlds. Harvey adopts a similar strategy of temporal compression, confining her narrative to a twenty-four-hour period aboard the space station, where the most mundane actions, such as the performance of personal hygiene in microgravity or the simple act of contemplating a photograph, become points of departure for expansive journeys into memory and emotion, thereby transforming the ordinary into a site of profound psychological excavation. Both Woolf and Harvey prioritise the interiority of consciousness above the external event, locating the true significance of narrative within what Woolf described as the 'luminous halo' of subjective experience. Woolf's focus on 'moments of being' finds its parallel in Harvey's meticulous attention to the phenomenology of orbit, where time is not experienced as a straightforward progression but rather as a series of affective and experiential states, each shaping and reshaping the contours of the self.

The Language Paradox

Harvey's prose is marked by pronounced density and richness, qualities that, though initially captivating, can, when experienced over an extended period, culminate in cognitive exhaustion. The sustained intensity of her language demands a heightened attentiveness from the reader, which may, over time, become overwhelming. Harvey's inclination towards extensive descriptive elaboration often leads to an overabundance of detail, which in turn jeopardises the coherence of the narrative. The persistent layering of sensory and metaphorical language, though undeniably evocative, tends to subordinate the structural unity of the text to the sheer force of linguistic ornamentation, so that the narrative's progression becomes secondary to the immersive, and at times overwhelming, experience of language itself.

The deliberate omission of quotation marks constitutes a significant formal intervention, one that complicates the reader's ability to distinguish between spoken dialogue and internal monologue. This stylistic choice effectively dissolves the boundaries separating external reality from the interiority of consciousness, producing a continuous narrative flow in which the demarcation between voices is persistently ambiguous. The removal of typographical markers for speech produces a textual continuum in which narrative, dialogue, and memory are rendered indistinct, facilitating the emergence of a unified discursive field. This formal device creates a sense of collective subjectivity where individual voices are subsumed within the broader phenomenological environment of the narrative space. Such formal experimentation entails a significant risk of reader alienation, yet for some readers it serves as an enabling mechanism for immersive engagement. The abandonment of conventional narrative demarcations invites a mode of reading predicated on surrender to the text's internal logic, rather than adherence to established structural expectations.

Sensory Experience

What sets Harvey's work apart is the way it draws the reader into the lived reality of the space station, by descriptions to the extent of immersion in the daily rhythms and subtle mechanisms that make life possible in orbit. The narrative places the reader inside the station, making the constant presence of machinery and the fragility of survival palpable at every turn. Harvey manages to bridge the gap between the technical language of space exploration and the immediate, bodily experience of the astronauts. The novel does not require the reader

to possess scientific expertise; instead, it highlights the sensations and careful routines that define existence in microgravity. Whether it is the act of observing weather patterns from above or recording the shifting outlines of the Earth, these daily tasks are rendered with a kind of poetry that makes the absence of gravity feel both physically disorienting and emotionally weighty, so that each moment carries a significance that goes beyond mere survival.

The text's fidelity to empirical detail is evident in its rigorous engagement with institutional sources such as NASA and the European Space Agency. This methodological thoroughness ensures the scientific verisimilitude of the narrative. The inclusion of the orbital schematic at the outset functions not merely as a visual supplement but as a cognitive apparatus, orienting the reader within the cyclical temporality of orbital mechanics. Harvey's narrative weaves together the technical realities of space with the emotional lives of those who inhabit it, using scientific detail as a foundation for exploring the inner worlds of the crew. In doing so, the novel transforms the International Space Station from a remote, unfamiliar setting into a space where human vulnerability and connection become possible. It shows how literature can cross the boundaries of both place and experience, allowing readers to find a sense of belonging even in the most distant and inhospitable environments.

In her depiction of space exploration, Harvey brings in a way of seeing that is rooted in the tradition of nature writing, where the world is understood through its weather, its animals, and its landscapes rather than the usual focus on technology and machinery that is so often present in accounts of orbital life. The inside of the spacecraft, which might otherwise seem cold and mechanical, is described in terms that recall the shifting of clouds, the movement of birds, and the contours of the Earth, so that what should be a sterile and artificial environment becomes, in her hands, something alive and resonant with the natural world. Harvey observes the world outside the spacecraft as a shifting scene of light and movement, where the Earth below is seen not as a distant object but as a living surface, full of the same migrations and animal energies that shape life on the ground. Describing the space station and its surroundings in terms of the natural world, she refuses to accept the usual division between nature and technology, showing instead that even in the most artificial settings, our way of seeing remains deeply shaped by the patterns and rhythms of the Earth. Harvey transforms the International Space Station from a distant, unfamiliar machine into something that continues the long human tradition of watching and making sense of the Earth's cycles. She compares the view from orbit with the way artists compose landscapes, showing that even amid technology, people cannot help but use the language and habits of nature to understand what they see. The act of looking down at the Earth from space becomes, for Harvey, another way in which nature, through human eyes and inventions, turns back to contemplate itself.

However, there are important criticisms of the narrative technique that deserve attention, as they point to real limitations in the text. The book's emphasis on detailed, almost poetic description within a short time frame can seem at odds with its attempt to tackle such large issues, and for some, this results in writing that feels repetitive. This approach is central to Harvey's style in the novel. Instead of focusing on dramatic events or the spectacle of space, she chooses a quieter, more reflective tone, finding meaning in the small, everyday details of the astronauts' lives. The book is profoundly confined to the thoughts and reflections of the astronauts (Hook). To critically examine Harvey's work, it is necessary to consider the 'White Writing' debate and the risk of aesthetic excess that comes with it, a risk that even celebrated authors are not exempt from. Some critics argue that Harvey's prose sometimes falls into 'white writing,' where the search for beautiful description and luminous imagery overshadows the actual story. The repeated attention to how light moves through the station's windows or glimmers on the Pacific has been seen as reducing the tension in the narrative, pushing the human stories and conflicts into the background while the visual details take centre stage. The main criticism is that by turning every orbit into poetry, the novel risks erasing the real experiences and inner struggles of the astronauts. If the writing is always focused on the sublime, the emotional impact can become weaker, and the story may lose the sense of real, immediate human conflict, and can make the book a bit monotonous in parts (Flint). It is open to debate whether this approach is a flaw in the storytelling or a conscious artistic choice.

Harvey seems to suggest that simply experiencing light and the beauty of the Earth from orbit can carry the story on its own, without the need for forced drama. The novel moves between deep ideas and careful description, and whether it succeeds depends on how willing the reader is to accept this kind of experiment. By setting aside the usual tools of science fiction, Harvey asks whether the inner lives of her characters, without the help of technology or alien encounters, can carry the emotional and thematic weight that the genre often relies on. The novel's focus on beauty seen as a conscious choice, seems to argue that paying close attention to what is beautiful is a way of reminding us what we stand to lose in a world facing constant social and ecological threats. Only by truly seeing what matters can we understand why it is worth protecting.

Problem of the Real

A deeper engagement with Harvey's novel brings us to what can be called the Problem of the Real. Critics have pointed out that while Harvey's narrative is carefully crafted and visually striking, it offers a version of the world that is noticeably cleansed of its harsher truths. The novel seems to deliberately set aside the material and social suffering that shapes the everyday existence of most people across the globe. From the orbital

perspective, the ongoing violence, deprivation, and exploitation on the ground are made invisible. The daily realities of unrest and inequality are absorbed into the smooth, unified image of the planet. The main criticism here is that Harvey's focus on the Overview Effect and the language of planetary unity risks hiding the divisions and exclusions that shape the lives of those pushed to the margins by global power structures. The elevated viewpoint, which seems to offer a sense of calm detachment, only highlights how far removed this vision is from the immediate realities of suffering and conflict. This supposedly higher perspective can be read as an escape. By presenting Earth as a single, undivided whole, the novel risks glossing over the hard realities of borders and hierarchies, which, for many people, are not just ideas but real barriers that limit and exclude. The question, then, is whether seeing the planet as one actually leads to any real ethical understanding, or if it simply reflects the privilege of those who can afford to ignore the divisions and struggles that define life for so many. Yet the aim is not to deny suffering, but to bring the idea of shared responsibility to the forefront. If we cannot see the planet as a whole, our attempts to address its crises remain scattered and incomplete. Harvey's use of the ideal acts as a mirror, showing just how far we are from any real sense of unity. Even if this vision can be criticised for being too abstract or for overlooking real pain, it is through this very abstraction that a new way of thinking about our ethical responsibilities might emerge.

The Earth as the Only Centre

The astronauts are compelled to return to Earth with a reconsideration of what it means for Earth to be the only true centre of their existence. The journey, which began with the promise of distance and detachment, ultimately circles back to the inescapable reality that everything begins and ends with Earth. Throughout history, people have seen themselves as the centre of the universe, with everything else existing in relation to human needs and desires. In Orbital, however, this perspective is turned on its head. The experience of orbiting the planet, witnessing the same cycles over and over, strips away the illusion of human importance. The concerns and identities that seem so significant on Earth are revealed to be small and almost irrelevant when set against the vastness of space and the endless repetition of the planet's movement. Harvey suggests that by pushing humans to the edge, the story allows Earth itself to become the true centre of meaning. People are no longer in control; instead, they are shown to be dependent on the planet and its systems. The narrative shows how the ego, which usually dominates our sense of self, must be set aside if we are to see things clearly. The astronauts, who start out as individuals with their own stories and concerns, are gradually transformed into mere observers, absorbed into something much larger and older than themselves.

Conclusion

Orbital by Samantha Harvey explores how leaving the Earth, even temporarily, changes the way people understand their place in the world. The novel does not present space travel as a way to escape the Earth, but instead as a means to reconsider what the planet means to those who live on it. Harvey shows that it is necessary to move beyond narrow identities and loyalties, and to see the planet as a whole as the main concern. The value that people once placed on borders or nations is replaced by a sense of responsibility for the entire planet, which becomes the central obligation for everyone. Focusing on the emotional and psychological experience of seeing the Earth from a distance, Harvey treats space exploration more than a matter of scientific facts or technical achievement. By using the idea of the 'lover's eye', Harvey suggests that seeing the planet from afar makes every detail of life on Earth seem more important and meaningful. The novel encourages readers to pay close attention to the planet, treating it with ongoing care and respect.

Harvey makes it clear that there is no real possibility of leaving the Earth behind or finding another planet to replace it. The common idea that people can escape to Mars or some other world is shown as a way to avoid responsibility rather than face it. The novel insists that people are tied to the Earth and must deal with the problems and demands of life here, rather than imagining that they can simply leave them behind. Human existence is not merely situated upon the Earth but is constitutively derived from it; it is shaped by the planet itself. There is no real 'away' where people can send their waste or their problems, whether material or affective. The text posits that maintaining a sustained, attentive regard for the planet is indispensable to its habitability. Harvey argues that only by paying careful and ongoing attention to the planet can people hope to keep it liveable. Harvey thus articulates an imperative to relinquish escapist fantasies and instead face the reality of the situation, for humanity to take responsibility for the Earth and its future.

In the end, Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* balance the formal experimentation and emotional pastiche in a surprisingly effective way. The novel dispenses with the old-fashioned narrative clash, preferring quiet realism and no plot, reflecting the hypnotic, feel-like-reality cycle of the orbit itself. This novel of consciousness explores the otherness of space by itself streaming of consciousness style, with a close focus on sensory experience, thereby turning the extreme isolation of space into a place where much human connection and philosophical questioning occur. As the astronauts struggle with the language paradox, finding that the beautiful spectacle of the earth continually exceeds any possibility of description, so too the novel itself is a testament to the ability of literature

to come close to the unspeakable. Orbital's treatment of the issue of reality from four hundred kilometres above the surface is an epic re-jig of our position in the universe. As the astronauts (and the reader) watches the Earth diminishing in their window, it is obvious that the boundaries of nation-states and geopolitical statics have been removed, and that there is one dominating point that cannot be ignored: despite the vastness of space that surrounds us, Earth remains the only true centre of our lives.

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