

Orbital Ecocentrism: Harvey's Manifesto for Planetary Consciousness

Dr. Anupam Dutta

Associate Professor, Department of English, Barbhag College, Assam, India

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Abstract

Samantha Harvey's 2024 Booker Prize-winning novel Orbital serves as a profound ecocentric manifesto cultivating planetary consciousness in the Anthropocene. Set over sixteen orbits on the International Space Station, six multinational astronauts observe Earth's revolutions from low orbit. This paper posits Harvey's "space pastoral" as employing the orbital gaze to dismantle anthropocentric boundaries and affirm Earth's intrinsic value as a biotic community. Rooted in Aldo Leopold's land ethic and Arne Naess's deep ecology, the analysis shows how the novel's cyclical structure mirrors ecological rhythms, challenging linear temporality. Close readings of typhoons, auroras, and evaporating seas critique human degradation while fusing personal grief with planetary loss. The ecocentric sublime blends awe and sorrow, converting impotence into ethical demand for kinship. Using qualitative ecocritical methods—including close reading and intertextual analysis—the study explores interconnectedness, microgravity frailty, and manifesto implications for policy and education. Orbital calls for a shift from conquest to stewardship. This research advances spatial ecocriticism, highlighting the novel's pivotal role in Anthropocene literature and providing a blueprint for transformative, regenerative narratives.

I. INTRODUCTION

Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* (2024), the 2024 Booker Prize-winning novel, offers a slender yet profound meditation on humanity's place within the biosphere. Set aboard a fictionalized International Space Station, the narrative unfolds across sixteen ninety-minute orbits in a single Earth Day, during which six multinational astronauts—Chie (Japan), Anton (Russia), Pietro (Italy), Nell (United Kingdom), Huang (China), and Shaun (United States)—witness the planet's ceaseless revolutions from 250 miles above. Far from conventional plot-driven fiction, Harvey employs a cyclical, fragmented structure that mirrors the station's

relentless motion, compressing cosmic vastness into intimate perceptual labour: vacuuming dust in microgravity, monitoring experiments, and confronting bodily disorientation while gazing upon typhoons, auroras, evaporating seas, and shrinking ice sheets.

This paper reinterprets *Orbital* as an ecocentric manifesto that cultivates planetary consciousness. By adopting the "orbital gaze," Harvey dissolves anthropocentric boundaries, revealing Earth as a living biotic community worthy of intrinsic moral consideration. Drawing on Aldo Leopold's land ethic and Arne Naess's deep ecology, the novel transforms low-Earth orbit into a "space pastoral" (Kelly,

2024)—a realist vantage that inverts terrestrial nature writing, fostering detachment that paradoxically deepens relational empathy. In the Anthropocene, amid biodiversity collapse and intensifying climate crises, *Orbital* moves beyond elegy to ethical provocation: viewing Earth from afar compels readers to “think like a mountain” from the void, reimagining sustainability as biospheric egalitarianism.

The novel’s formal innovations further enact this shift. Its non-linear, multi-voiced narration entangles personal grief (Chie’s mourning for her mother) with planetary loss, challenging linear anthropocentric temporality. As the crew orbits, syntactic and thematic cycles— “the earth turns beneath them, and they turn with it, or it with them” (Harvey, 2024, p. 4)—prefigure a relational ontology where observer and observed co-constitute one another. This analysis positions *Orbital* as a pivotal text in Anthropocene literature, extending contemporary ecocriticism by spatializing ethical reorientation. Through expanded close readings, theoretical integration, and implications for policy and pedagogy, the study demonstrates how Harvey’s work demands a consciousness shift: from planetary conquerors to humble kin.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecocentrism challenges centuries of Enlightenment dualisms by ascribing intrinsic value to ecological wholes rather than deriving worth solely from human utility. Joseph DesJardins (2023) defines it as recognizing “the moral standing of natural objects and systems independent of their utility to humans,” rejecting anthropocentrism’s instrumental view of nature as resource or backdrop. Foundational to this framework is Aldo Leopold’s (1949) land ethic in *A Sand County Almanac*, which expands the ethical community to “soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” (p. 204). Leopold’s criterion—“A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (pp. 224–225)—shifts conservation from management to relational reverence,

urging humans to see themselves as “plain members and citizens” rather than conquerors.

Arne Naess’s (1973) deep ecology radicalizes this through biospheric egalitarianism, positing all life forms as possessing equal intrinsic value within a “relational, total-field image” where organisms function as “knots in a biosphere net” (p. 95). Naess’s “Ecosophy T” promotes self-realization via identification with the ecosphere, broadening the ego to encompass planetary interdependence and advocating platforms like anti-consumerism and wilderness preservation. Contemporary ecocriticism builds on these foundations. Mohd Shamim et al. (2025) note a “notable rise in narratives that centre nature as an active and dynamic presence rather than a passive backdrop” (p. 406), compelling ethical reconsideration of human-nonhuman relations. N. K. Parashari (2019) similarly highlights ecoliterature where “nature here is not passive—it’s alive, shaping destinies, offering refuge, and issuing warnings” (p. 83).

Scholarship on *Orbital* itself remains emergent yet illuminating. Claire Cazajous-Augé (2025) introduces the “Anthropocene cosmic sublime,” arguing that Harvey’s orbital perspective renegotiates Kantian and Burkean awe through embodied detachment, evoking smallness before the cosmos while underscoring environmental responsibilities and countering imperialist space rhetoric. Haydn Washington et al. (2017) reinforce ecocentrism’s urgency against commodifying “ecosystem services” discourse, aligning with Leopold’s evolutionary kinship that reminds humans they are “windblown leaves,” not the wind. Reviews and interviews with Harvey further contextualize the text: she describes her intent as evoking “the beauty of that vantage point with the care of a nature writer” (Kelly, 2024), while acknowledging a “pang of loss” amid celebration (Higgins, 2024). This literature review reveals a gap that the present study fills: a sustained, spatially inflected ecocritical reading that operationalizes Leopold and Naess through Harvey’s unique orbital form, bridging philosophy, literary analysis, and activist implications in Anthropocene fiction.

III. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study adopts an ecocritical framework grounded in close textual analysis and thematic interpretation. The primary text, Harvey's *Orbital* (2024), was selected for its timely engagement with space, ecology, and ethics following its Booker Prize recognition. Supplementary materials include author interviews (Higgins, 2024; Kelly, 2024; Shapiro, 2024) and secondary sources on deep ecology, land ethics, and Anthropocene aesthetics.

Data collection involved systematic close reading of the novel's sixteen orbital chapters, identifying recurring motifs: the "orbital gaze," cyclical structure, depictions of natural phenomena (typhoons, auroras, evaporating seas), human frailty in microgravity, and intersections of personal/planetary loss. Passages were annotated for intertextual resonances with Leopold (1949) and Naess (1973), noting linguistic features such as imperative "See how" constructions, syntactic entanglement, and painterly catalogues of Earth's processes.

Thematic analysis proceeded inductively: initial coding generated categories (e.g., "biotic community," "relational self," "ecocentric sublime"), which were then deductively mapped onto theoretical frameworks. Structural elements—cyclical temporality, multi-consciousness narration—were examined as formal enactments of ecocentrism. Triangulation occurred through cross-referencing with Cazajous-Augé (2025), Shamim et al. (2025), and Parashari (2019). Ethical considerations included respectful engagement with the text's grief-laden tone and avoidance of reductive interpretations. Limitations include the novel's brevity, which, while enabling depth, constrains exhaustive coverage of all crew perspectives. This methodology yields a rigorous, spatially attuned reading that illuminates *Orbital*'s manifesto qualities while contributing to spatial ecocriticism.

IV. DISCUSSION

4.1 Theoretical Foundations of Ecocentrism in *Orbital*

Orbital operationalizes ecocentrism by spatializing Leopold's and Naess's philosophies with remarkable precision and emotional resonance. From orbit, Earth appears as an autonomous whole—"ceaseless movement" of clouds dragged equatorward, oceans evaporating in loops (Harvey, 2024, pp. 23, 83–84)—demanding the land ethic's preservation of "integrity, stability, and beauty" (Leopold, 1949, pp. 224–225). This is no abstract philosophical imposition; Harvey grounds it in the astronauts' daily perceptual labor. The crew's tending of pea shoots and cotton roots in zero gravity becomes a literal enactment of stewardship, where even microscopic life forms assert membership in the biotic community (Harvey, 2024, p. 46). Such moments microcosmically mirror planetary interdependence, revealing how human survival hinges on the "grace" of Earth's systems (Harvey, 2024, p. 34).

Naessian identification expands further through the novel's portrayal of isolation as a catalyst for relational ontology. The crew, diverse in nationality yet unified in microgravity, embodies "knots in a biosphere net," their shared routines forging a microbiome that prefigures global kinship: "family... who know the things they see" (Harvey, 2024, p. 45; Naess, 1973, p. 95). Harvey critiques anthropocentric "want" that reshapes "forests, poles, reservoirs, glaciers, rivers" (Harvey, 2024, p. 67), yet counters despair by affirming Earth's agency as an "exulted lover" (Harvey, 2024, p. 3). This ontological fusion—where subject and observed collapse into co-constitution—directly challenges shallow ecology's utilitarian lens. Recent readings of the novel as planetary fiction underscore this borderless ethic, promoting an eco-cosmopolitanism that transcends nations and species (see also the emphasis on Earth as integrated whole in contemporary planetary-fiction scholarship). By embedding these foundations in lived orbital experience, Harvey not only illustrates but enacts the perceptual "zoom out" necessary for biospheric egalitarianism, transforming philosophical tenets into visceral, narrative imperatives that linger with readers long after the final orbit.

4.2 The Orbital Gaze: Structure as Ecocentric Revelation

The novel's sixteen-chapter structure—each an ascending or descending orbit—embodies holistic revelation while actively resisting anthropocentric linearity. Time dilates under “the whipcrack of morning... every ninety minutes” (Harvey, 2024, p. 5), creating perceptual eternity that compresses global processes into intimate witness. Boundaries blur as nation-states flatten into “endlessly connected continents” (Harvey, 2024, p. 89), enacting Naess's total-field image at the formal level. Harvey's prose, painterly yet scientifically precise, catalogues atmospheric dynamics as symphonic interplay: “How the earth drags at the air. See how the clouds at the equator are dragged up and eastward... All the moist warm air evaporating off the equatorial oceans and pulled in an arc to the poles, cooling, sinking, tugged back down in a westward curve” (Harvey, 2024, pp. 83–84). The repeated imperative “See how” functions as both aesthetic device and ethical summons, directly implicating the reader-astronaut in active engagement rather than passive spectatorship (Shamim et al., 2025, p. 413).

This gaze fundamentally decenters humanity. Astronauts observe auroras “like green waterfalls” (Harvey, 2024, p. 112) and typhoons “three hundred miles wide at a pressing speed” (Harvey, 2024, p. 55) with impotence that critiques technological hubris, including the illusions of space tourism. Yet this very limitation affirms Naessian egalitarianism: humans cannot dominate what they can only witness in its autonomous majesty. The cyclical refusal of resolution—“And so they turn, and the earth turns with them” (Harvey, 2024, p. 211)—reinforces ecological rhythms, inviting readers into perpetual ethical reflection. Structurally, the fragmentation across consciousnesses mirrors relational ontology, where individual subjectivities dissolve into collective planetary awareness. Compared to traditional eco-narratives, Harvey's innovation lies in elevation as ecocritical tool: the orbital remove universalizes the local, linking Chie's grief to a Philippine fisherman's typhoon peril (Harvey, 2024, p. 55) and inculcating biospheric empathy that ground-based literature often struggles to achieve at such scale. Thus, form itself becomes manifesto, each orbit a

pedagogical lesson in wholeness that challenges readers to reorient their own anthropocentric orbits.

4.3 Beauty and Loss: The Ecocentric Sublime in the Anthropocene

Harvey navigates the Anthropocene sublime through a carefully calibrated duality of awe shadowed by desecration, evoking Edmund Burke's terror-beauty dialectic while reframing it entirely within ecocentric terms. From orbit, the planet gleams with “a burst of hopeful colour” (Harvey, 2024, p. 12), its “miraculous and bizarre loveliness” (Harvey, 2024, p. 112) dwarfing human folly. Yet scars intrude relentlessly: shrinking ice sheets, burning oil spills, and a “precious, glorious coral reef near the Philippines” ravaged by warming seas (Harvey, 2024, p. 67). Super-typhoons, “fuelled by fervour” from overheated oceans, swell with “building magnificence” and “pressing speed” (Harvey, 2024, p. 35), their scale blending meteorological violence with cosmic revelation. Cazajous-Augé (2025) aptly terms this the “Anthropocene cosmic sublime,” where embodied detachment in space—distinct from telescope-mediated views—evokes traditional affects of smallness and awe while foregrounding urgent environmental responsibilities and dismantling imperialist narratives of technological mastery.

The sublime yields ethical transformation rather than paralysis. Astronauts track the typhoon impotently, their “privileged anxious view” inducing moral vertigo that echoes Leopold's call for humility before the biotic community assaulted by unchecked “growing and consuming” (Higgins, 2024). Personal loss intensifies this fusion: Chie's maternal bereavement parallels Earth's maternity—“a mother waiting for her children to return, full of stories and rapture and longing” (Harvey, 2024, p. 3)—while her “weightless tears” orbit like raindrops, blurring emotional and meteorological scales (Harvey, 2024, p. 58). The fisherman's “tiny boat tossed like a leaf” (Harvey, 2024, p. 55) becomes proxy for her grief, enacting Naess's identification wherein “the self... increases the relevance... of the other” (Naess, 1973, p. 137). Harvey's euphoric prose, born of insomnia-fuelled

writing, transmutes anxiety into demand: “Can humans not find peace with one another? With the earth? It’s not a fond wish but a fretful demand” (Harvey, 2024, p. 112). This ecocentric sublime thus critiques geoengineering optimism, favouring Leopoldian reverence and positioning beauty itself as spur to kinship and action in the face of the sixth extinction.

4.4 Interconnectedness, Land Ethic, and Planetary Kinship from Space

Viewed from the station, Earth’s interdependent web dissolves human boundaries: “Asia and Australia as dark shapes,” clouds arcing in “ceaseless movement” (Harvey, 2024, pp. 23, 83). The ontological equation— “The earth is its air currents, the air currents the earth” (Harvey, 2024, p. 84)—collapses subject-predicate distinctions, prefiguring Parashari’s (2019) eco-narratives where ecosystems actively “shape destinies” (p. 83). Astronauts enact Leopoldian citizenship through meticulous monitoring of experiments, the pea shoots’ “tiny green flags of possibility” symbolizing resilience amid orbital sterility and underscoring human dependence on Earth’s grace (Harvey, 2024, p. 46; Leopold, 1949, pp. 224–225).

Yet fractures persist, mirroring terrestrial inequities. Diplomatic tensions over mundane protocols (Harvey, 2024, p. 94) parallel ground-level geopolitics exacerbating climate injustice; the typhoon disproportionately threatens the Global South, prompting Pietro’s silent plea (Harvey, 2024, p. 55). Naess’s relational self amplifies this through metaphors of utter dependence— “sailors on a ship on a deep, dark unswimmable sea” (Harvey, 2024, p. 34)—extending the “biosphere net” to the void itself. Linguistic diversity among the crew (“English laced with Russian, Italian, Mandarin”; Harvey, 2024, p. 47) mirrors ecological plurality, urging equitable governance. Harvey spatializes kinship innovatively: detachment breeds protective yearning (“the desire... to protect this huge yet tiny earth”; Harvey, 2024, p. 112), while frailty binds bodily vulnerability to biospheric wounds. This interconnectedness demands Earth jurisprudence—rights for rivers and ecosystems (Washington et al., 2017)—honouring the land ethic from the exosphere and modelling

cooperative globalism against consumptive tyranny.

4.5 Manifesto Implications and Human Frailty

Orbital transcends fiction to function as perceptual training for biospheric mindfulness, modelling how orbital imagery could inform curricula, international policy, and even space-agency protocols. Its grounded realism demystifies space as humility’s frontier rather than conquest (Shapiro, 2024), countering escapism critiques by insisting on Earthward focus. Human frailty—demineralizing bones, fluid-shifted faces, shared insomnia under “nights without night” (Harvey, 2024, p. 45)—parallels planetary peril, critiquing anthropocentric isolation and demanding collective reckoning: “Can we not stop tyrannising... this one thing on which our lives depend?” (Harvey, 2024, p. 112). Echoing Leopold’s evolutionary odyssey, the novel positions humans as latecomers who must evolve kinship ethics amid vulnerability.

Manifesto implications extend practically: typhoon tracking as metaphor for climate justice, crew diversity as template for equitable cooperation. Harvey’s refusal of dystopian closure affirms earned optimism (Higgins, 2024), inspiring activist fiction and policy innovations such as mandatory ecocentric Earth-observation reporting via satellites. By intertwining frailty with agency, Orbital humanizes holism, ensuring individual stories amplify rather than eclipse the planetary chorus and compelling readers toward regenerative action.

V. CONCLUSION

Samantha Harvey’s *Orbital* stands as a luminous ecocentric manifesto, its orbital gaze dissolving human exceptionalism to reveal Earth’s biotic chorus in all its miraculous complexity. Through cyclical structure, sublime duality, interconnectedness, and kinship forged in frailty, the novel enacts Leopold’s land ethic and Naess’s deep ecology with unprecedented spatial immediacy, compelling a profound planetary consciousness: reverence for the “answer to every question” (Harvey, 2024, p. 3). In an epoch of unravelling ecosystems—where biodiversity plummets and seas rise—the work

resists despair, modelling narrative resilience through renewal in every orbit and centering nature as active agent (Shamim et al., 2025). Its formal polyphony and spatial ethics provide blueprints for future eco-fiction, encouraging novels that orbit multiple perspectives to dissolve authorial control in favour of biospheric polyphony.

The transformative potential of Harvey's vision extends far beyond literary circles. As recent scholarship on planetary fiction emphasizes, *Orbital* promotes an eco-cosmopolitan ethic that reimagines human-nonhuman relations on a borderless Earth, fostering cultural shifts toward regenerative economies and Earth jurisprudence (Washington et al., 2017). Pedagogically, the novel invites integration into interdisciplinary curricula: literature courses orbiting *Orbital* alongside Leopold's almanac and virtual-reality simulations of low-Earth orbit could train generations in biospheric empathy, blending narrative analysis with environmental science and ethics. Such approaches address the novel's call for perceptual training, turning passive readers into active stewards.

Culturally, *Orbital* contributes to a broader redefinition of humanity's cosmic role. By humanizing the sublime—interweaving personal voids with ecological absences—it counters Anthropocene paralysis, offering hope as “fretful demand” rather than naïve wish (Harvey, 2024, p. 112). In an era of cli-fi often dominated by catastrophe, Harvey's measured celebration amid loss models balanced activism, inspiring artists, policymakers, and citizens alike to prioritize “generosity and cooperation” over consumption (Higgins, 2024). Future research might empirically study reader responses—measuring shifts in environmental attitudes post-reading—or comparatively analyze *Orbital* alongside emerging space literatures to trace evolving spatial ecocriticism.

Ultimately, Harvey's manifesto is existential and urgent: zoom out, witness the “burst of hopeful colour” and “miraculous and bizarre loveliness” (Harvey, 2024, pp. 12, 112), then commit to stewardship as kin, not kings. Failure to heed these risks not only ecological collapse but the erasure of our shared cosmic

story. By orbiting this text, we learn to orbit our world with reverence, ensuring its revolutions endure for orbits yet to come. In doing so, *Orbital* does not merely describe planetary consciousness—it awakens it, positioning literature as vital catalyst in humanity's ethical evolution toward biospheric flourishing.

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