ASPECTS OF SPACE AND SPATIALITY IN SAMANTHA HARVEY'S 2024 BOOKER PRIZE-WINNING NOVEL ORBITAL

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Abstract: *This paper examines the physical and metaphorical representation of space in the novel Orbital by Samantha Harvey. My aim is to show how Harvey's representation serves as a medium for six astronauts on a mission in a spacecraft to experience a deeper connection with Earth and reevaluate their existence within the microcosm of the spacecraft and the macrocosm of space. Six astronauts from different countries rotate within the spacecraft, conducting experiments. However, their primary activity is to observe the Earth as it rotates beneath the spacecraft's orbit. Orbital is closely connected with spatiality, as it examines how space and the perspective of the Earth from above shape human awareness and identity. I will use Bachelard's concept of home as the theoretical framework, since it addresses the intimate bond between the individual and their spaces of home. The astronauts observe the Earth, each time, feeling its pull and becoming mesmerised by the magnificence, beauty, and grandeur of "our silent blue planet". Despite being distant from it and confined within the spacecraft, as opposed to the vastness of galactic space, they continuously sense this pull from every angle of their view of the Earth, deepening their connection and prompting them to reevaluate their existence both within and outside it.*

Keywords: *Space; spatiality; orbit; earth*

Samantha Harvey (1975) was born in Kent, the daughter of a builder. She studied philosophy at the University of York and the University of Sheffield. Harvey is a sculptor as well and is presently a reader at Bath Spa University. She wrote five novels, including ORBITAL, which brought her the 2024 Booker Prize award. She is regarded as "This generation's Virginia Woolf" by the Telegraph and "one of the UK's most exquisite stylists" by the Guardian. Her novels have been shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction, the Guardian First Book Award, the Walter Scott Prize, and the James Tait Black Prize, and longlisted for the Man Booker Prize. With the publication of Orbital, she was also shortlisted for the 2024 Booker Prize. The reviews she received before and after the prize have all been favourable, concentrating on her lyrical language, her poetic style, and how she portrays the realisation and appreciation of human life in connection to earth and nature, and the impossibility of not being able to survive without one or the other. The opening paragraph of the book, also mentioned on the official website of the Booker Prize (….) foreshadows the elegant and poetic style:

> Rotating about the earth in their spacecraft they are so together, and so alone, that even their thoughts, their interior mythologies, at times converse. 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)

The powerful style of the final paragraph of the novel once again captivates the reader, and the narration leaves one awestruck not only by our "mother earth" but also by the immersive quality of the language as the novel concludes:

> And the earth, a complex orchestra of sounds, an out-of –tune band practice of saws and woodwind, a spacey full-throttle distortion of engines, a speed-of-light battle between galactic tribes, a ricocet of trills from a damp rainforest morning, the opening bars of electronic trance, and behind it all a ringing sound, a sound gathered in a hollow throat. A fumbled harmony taking shape. The sound of very far-off voices coming together in a choral mass, an angelic sustained note that expands through the static. You think it'll burst into song, the way the choral sound emerges full of intent, and this polished-bead planet sounds briefly so sweet. Its light is a choir. Its light is an ensemble of a trillion things which rally and unify for a few short moments before falling back into the rin-tin-tin and jumbled tumbling of static galactic woodwind rainforest trance of a wild and lifting world (Harvey 136)

Alexandra Harris, in The Guardian, writes the following in her review of the novel:

> With this slender and stretchy fifth novel, Harvey makes an ecstatic voyage with an imagined crew on the International Space Station and looks back to earth with a lover's eye. Orbital goes into flight for a single day, though a day is a different kind of thing up here, where" the whipcrack of morning arrives every ninety minutes" and the sun is " up-down-up-down like a mechanical toy". It's a nicely giddying structural play to align each chapter with an orbit of the Earth: 16 orbits all together. The mobile narrative sends out probes into past and future, but all is held in the looping motion of elliptical travel (Booker Prize).

Orbital is the first space-set winner of the Booker Prize, a novel of modest size, and also one of the shortest Booker Prize winners, with 136 pages.

Orbital narrates the story of six astronauts from different countries aboard the ISS, observing meteorological data and conducting scientific experiments. The plot depicts a day in the life of four astronauts from America, Italy, Japan, and Britain, along with two Russian cosmonauts. Their primary focus is on observing Earth as it rotates beneath the spacecraft's orbit. The novel explores the theme of spatiality, analysing how space and notions of space influence human understanding of the relationship between people and the Earth. During their time on the ISS, the astronauts witness sixteen sunrises and sixteen sunsets in a single day, with each continent coming into view multiple times daily. The crew can monitor all climate events, such as typhoons, thunderstorms, and meteorological changes. Although Samantha Harvey is not an astronaut and has never been to space, the imaginative and fictional structure, combined with the narrative style of the novel, successfully immerses the reader as the crew is immersed in the view of Earth from above.

> Sometimes they look at the earth and could be tempted to roll back all they know to be true, and believe instead that it sits, this planet, at the centre of everything. It seems so spectacular, so dignified and regal. They could still be led to believe that God himself had dropped it there, at the very centre of the waltzing universe, and they could forget all those truths men and women had uncovered….. that the earth is a piddling speck at the centre of nothing. They could think: no negligible thing could shine so bright, no far-hurled nothingy satellite could bother itself with these shows of beauty, no paltry rock could arrange such intricacy as fungus and minds (Harvey 28).

The novel has captivated both readers and critics with its beautifully crafted, almost prosaic style, which moves as quietly and smoothly as the Earth rotates beneath the spacecraft.

> While they look at blue square the equator is crossed and there's a change of guard; the northern hemisphere comes and the moon has upturned. Its waxing light which was on its left hand limb is now on its right. A crépe flipped in the pan. A thinning of stars. No longer the dense astral field of southern skies which look toward the Milky Way's centre; now the stars they can see are those far-flung, on the Milky Way's outer spirals where galaxy fades in amassing light years and something gives way to less which gives way to nothing. Then night-time cedes to another day. Over Venezuela is that first blinding spike of light on the horizon that they know well to be sun. It spikes and goes, spikes and goes. And then the right side of the earth's curve becomes a gleaming scimitar. Silver pours out and the stars are banished and the dark ocean turns to an instant dawn (Harvey 64-65).

Life on the ISS involves experiments, scientific work, and daily routines such as eating, sleeping, exercising, and maintaining the habits they left behind on Earth. However, the lives of the astronauts are shaped by a series of emotional, psychological, and eye-opening revelations about the meaning of life, memory, and the inevitable connection they feel towards Earth. The sensation of admiration, connection, and awe the astronauts experience when observing Earth from above is known in space terminology as "the overview effect," which refers to the cognitive shift in awareness that astronauts undergo when viewing Earth from space. This effect was first mentioned by the Russian astronaut Yuri Gagarin in 1961 (The Guardian). When astronauts look out of the window of their spacecraft, they are struck by its beauty, fragility, and the interconnectedness of all lands and continents as a unified whole, beyond all borders. Although the six astronauts have different, individual identities and come from diverse backgrounds and nations, they unite as one, each embodying a distinct aspect of human nature. In the words of one character, Chie, they are "a choreography of movements and functions".

> There is that idea of a floating family, but in some ways, they're not really family at all-they are both much more and much less than that. They're everything to each other for this short stretch of time because they're all there is. They are companions,

> colleagues, mentors, doctors, dentists, hairdressers. On spacewalks, launches, re-entry, in emergencies, they are each other's lifelines. They are each to the other a representative of the human race- they each have to suffice for billions of people (Harvey 18-19).

In the narration, Harvey reveals the way the crew members contemplate their place in the universe, mission and connection to each other in a professional but meditative manner:

> We have all been travelling, the crew thinks, travelling for years with barely a moment of settling; all of us living out of bags and borrowed places, hotels, space centres and training facilities, sleeping on friends' sofas in midway cities between one training course and another. Living in caves and submarines and deserts to test our mettle. If we have any single thing in common it's our acceptance of belonging nowhere and everywhere in order to reach this, this near-mythical craft. This last nationless, borderless outposts that strains against the tethers of biological life. What does a toilet have to do with anything? What use are diplomatic games on a spacecraft, locked into its orbit of tender indifference? And us? We are one. For now at least, we are one. Everything we have up here is only what we reuse and share. We can't be divided, this is the truth. We won't be because we can't be. We drink each other's recycled urine. We breathe each other's recycled air (Harvey 63-64)

Although physically distant from Earth, the astronauts maintain a connection in ways they have not realised while on Earth. They go through their usual routines of waking up, having breakfast or lunch, starting work, and engaging in familiar activities, all within the limited space of the spacecraft. They pretend to celebrate birthdays, organise dinner parties, arrange personal keepsakes, and have conversations over coffee, but they constantly feel the "ever-electric blue pull of the Earth" (Harvey 37). Sometimes, the astronauts discuss things they did when they were young, reminiscing and sharing memories; however:

> They don't normally talk about these things. It makes a change from talking about station problems, or rotas, or pinpointing and repairing docking leaks, or cleaning bacteria filter,or replacing the inlet fan or the heat exchanger. Or otherwise talking about TV shows they watched as kids or books they loved; it turns out they were all familiar with Winnie the Pooh in one form or in another,in their five different countries…. The same small animated bear there in some domain of their hearts. But when it comes to what got them here, what motives and desires, those things are behind them. They've got here,is what they think. You get here and your life starts anew, and everything you brought along you brought in your head, and unless it's needed it stays in your head, because this is it now. This is home. (Harvey 47)

The cosmic space, portrayed with great artistry in the narrative, is the area where astronauts live and work for a period. It is, for the time being, home for the crew in the vastness of the universe, metaphorically assuming the role of Earth, their real home, with its intimate spaces such as their sleeping bags,

kitchen, and working areas. One of the crew member contemplates the significance of their intimate spaces in the spacecraft as:

> I'll tell you something, Therese, about our sleeping bags.It's true that they hang, and most of us don't even fasten them with bungees to the Wall, we hang freely and sail about, and it's very comforting. But my first night here, I remember seeing my sleeping bag, and maybe at first sight, you might be—what?-crestfallen, crestfallen to think this is your bed for several months, but then you see something and it makes you smile. I saw that it didn't quite hang, it isn't just hanging you know- there's no gravity to make it, what's the Word, heavy or-
>
> Lifeless or limp.
>
> That's it. You know, it *billows* , just slightly it billows like a ship's sail in a perfect wind. And you know, then, so long as you stay in orbit you will be OK, you will not feel crestfallen, not once. You might miss home, you might be exhausted, you might feel like you're an animal in a cage, you might get lonely, but you will never, never be crestfallen (Harvey 101).

This approach in Harvey's narrative raises questions about how the "concept of home" is present yet transformed into a different level by creating imaginary and unusual spaces and places. Therefore, when this aspect of the narration is examined through Gaston Bachelard's concept of home, many parallels emerge. Bachelard, a French philosopher and linguist, describes the concept of home as "all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home", which is the environment in which protective beings live... the sites of our intimate lives' (Bachelard 27, 29-30). He developed his idea of the house as a place where identity, memory, and imagination intersect. Home is not only four walls but also a fixed object with a tangible and recognisable structure. In his work, Poetics of Space, Bachelard writes that "the house is one of the greatest Powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind" (Bachelard 28), suggesting that the home space is both physical and a creation of human imagination and dreams. For Bachelard, the house offers shelter "without which the human would be a dispersed figure" (On Art and Aesthetics 2016)

Although the space station and the orbit it is situated in is not in real terms similar to Bachelard's archetypal "house" which he discusses in his "Poetics of Space", nevertheless they still function as "home" for the crew mentally and physically, as can be seen in the above quotation. In this paper, I employ Bachelard's views on "home" to study how Harvey positions concepts of home, shelter, memory, interiority, and exteriority in a non-earth-bound space, and how characters experience this situation through conflicting feelings of longing and acceptance. In the "Poetics of Space" Bachelard mentions that the physical element of "home" also suggests man's connection to home mentally and emotionally in different forms: "the house shelters

daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer the house allows one to dream in peace I must Show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind (Bachelard 28). Extending and reinterpreting Bachelard's ideas of home, may also reveal how the concept of home persists in human beings in imaginative and non-terrestrial spaces, as oppossed to the physical landscapes of Bachelard's description.

Currently, astronauts regard this spacecraft as their home, providing shelter and enabling space operations. This space, viewed as a home they have adopted or claimed, can be understood through Bachelard's concept of home. The microcosm of the ISS creates a temporary sanctuary where the six astronauts eat, sleep, work, and most importantly, re-evaluate their connection to Earth. Outer space, the macrocosm where Earth appears in all its observable splendour, exists both in reality and within the dreams and thoughts of the astronauts. The paradox is that although the spacecraft functions as a temporary or assumed home, Earth is always within their sight and thus in their minds and dreams, giving them a sense of permanent shelter, belonging, and connectedness. It is the "mother earth" in its glorious and glittering form, offering the astronauts freedom from confinement, individuality from collectiveness, and permanence against temporality, survival against solitude.

My reading of space as created in Orbital from the perspective of Bachelard's concept of "home" allows me to engage with Henri Lefebvre's theory of space and spatiality as discussed in his book "The Production of Space" (1974). Exploring their manifestations in "Orbital" and juxtaposing these two concepts—namely, Lefebvre's idea of space and spatiality and Bachelard's notion of home—reveals how these interconnected concepts reflect different interpretations of space. Consequently, Bachelard's home concept sheds light on how the crew's physical and material experiences of space, along with how space is perceived imaginatively through dreams and memories, deepen our understanding of the bond between human beings and the earth. Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory, and notably his notion of space as a social product, highlights the importance of space as a socially shaped construct that operates across various systems, creating a physical and material environment for the astronauts to reside in.

The crew members aboard the spacecraft are highly trained astronauts who have undergone numerous simulations and real-life experiences to develop the essential qualities and skills for the important task of travelling to space and living and working in a spacecraft for nine months with colleagues from diverse backgrounds. The scientific and technological environment in which they operate—and are, in a way, influenced by—inevitably leads them to question their place on Earth and in space, as well as the impossibility of accepting the spacecraft and space as mere replicas of their Earth and home. Inevitably, the spatial context they live in is only temporary, and their

connection to "mother earth" is strongly felt even in their happiest moments onboard.

> For a split second Shaun thinks, what the hell am I doing here, in a tin can in a vacuum? A tinned man in a tinned can. Four inches of titanium away from death. Not just death, obliterated non-existence.
>
> Why would you do this? Trying to live where you can never thrive? Trying to go where the universe doesn't want you when there's a perfectly good earth just there that does. He's never sure if man's lust for space is curiosity or ingratitude. İf this weird hot longing makes him a hero or an idiot. Undoubtedly something just short of either (Harvey 49).

As Lefebvre explains in his book The Production of Space, space is conceptualised as follows:

> Not so many years ago, the word space had a strictly geometrical meaning: the idea it evoked was simply that of an empty area... and the general feeling was that the concept of space was ultimately a mathematical one. To speak of social space, therefore, would have sounded strange.' (1)

Lefebvre attempts to explain a new concept of space through three axes. One is the physical, which is the cosmos; the second is mental, encompassing logical and formal abstractions; and the third is the social. He is especially interested in the social axis of space since the other two also exist within it. He explains that, given the many divisions—whether abstract, philosophical, ideological, or scientific—descriptions of space are abundant. A unified theory of space aims to integrate these diverse elements to foster an environment conducive to sustainable criticism and debate (12-13). He further suggests that space is socially constructed. He states:

> (Social) space is a (social) product "Many people will find it hard to endorse the notion that space has taken on, within the present mode of production, within society as it actually is, a sort of reality of its own,….space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and action, that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power" (Lefebvre 26).

Lefebvre clarifies these interconnected dimensions through three concepts, which I will examine in relation to Orbital's explorations of space and spatiality, focusing on the themes of isolation, belonging, home, memory, and perception.

The first dimension Lefebvre discusses within social space is: 1—perceived space (spatial practice). It represents daily reality, the physical environment, and everyday habits and routines closely linked to urban life (the routes and networks connecting places designated for work, private life, and leisure) (Levebvre 38). It includes the most extreme separation between the

places it connects (Lefebvre 38). In the novel, as mentioned earlier, the spacecraft is the physical environment, the "assumed home" for the six astronauts—small and confined—in contrast to the vastness of outer space, where Earth and terrestrial life are. Yet, it is impossible to reach and currently provides no shelter. The astronauts carry out daily routines and practices, engage in social interactions, and have private experiences, thoughts, dreams, and imaginations. This is expressed in the narration as:

> They watch these cells under the microscope and take images of them, and every five days they renew the medium they grow in. They keep them at thirty-seven degrees and at five per cent carbon and at idael humidity and in perfect sterility, and when the resupply craft returns to earth in two weeks they'll stow them away, a Cargo they must accept is more important to humanity than their lives themselves, which are nothing much all told (Harvey 26)

Elsewhere, Anton, inside his confined sleeping bag, recalls the dreams he had earlier:

> A fortnight or so ago, Anton had a dream about the imminent moon landing. In fact he had two dreams in two consecutive nights, both very similar (which is typical of his brain, to make technical repeats of the same dream as if to test its efficiency). It isn't that being a cosmonaut, he normally dreams of the moon or space-on the contrary, being a cosmonaut, he normally has very practical dreams…(Harvey.42).

The second dimension of spatiality in Lefebvre's concept is conceived space or representations of space, which he explains as: "tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, signs, and codes, and to 'frontal' relations (Lefebvre 33) which is manifested in Orbital in many ways, such as the spaceship as a product of technology and planning, designed by an ideology that expects its development. Space from that aspect as a conceived space is a scientific, measurable, experimental area that can be scientifically observed, quantified, and hence, controlled.

Life on board is carefully planned and calculated, following the instructions and training received earlier. The narration aligns with this controlled mission in terms of the terminology used, reflecting the current framework of the mission. Its technology-driven production suggests what Lefebvre conceptualises as conceived space or representations of space. An example may be:

> Today is his four hundreth and thirty-fourth day in space, a tally arrived at over three different missions. He keeps close count. Of this mission it's day eighty-eight. In a single nine-month mission there are in total roughly five hundred and forty hours of morning exercise. …..Auroras, hurricanes, storms- their numbers unknown but their

> occurence certain. Nine full cycles, of course, of the moon, their silver companion moving placidly through its phases while the days go awry (Harvey 4).

The third dimension, in line with Lefebvre's concept of space, is known as lived space or spaces of representation. He describes it as:

> Representational spaces: space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the ' inhabitants' and 'users', but also of some artists and perhaps of those , such as a few writers and philosophers, who *describe* and aspire to do no more than describe. This is the dominated- and hence passively experienced- space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It ovelays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects. Thus representational spaces may be said, though again with certain exceptions, to tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs (Lefebvre 39)

Representational space, or lived space, is the most vivid and colourful dimension in Orbital. It also closely aligns with Bachelard's concept of 'home', which is expressed in the narration as a contrast between the assumed space—the spacecraft and the orbit, the macro and microcosms as 'home'—and Earth, depicted as the real, beautiful, "their towering parent ever-present through the dome of glass" (Harvey 8) as the astronauts observe Earth from the ship's window.

Lived space in Orbital is personal, shaped by reminiscences, memories, dreams, and longings. Earth is there, before their eyes, it is also always down there, in the vastness of space. From their confined and isolated, Bachelardian temporary home:

> they look down and understand why it's called Mother Earth. They all feel it from time to time. They all make an association between the earth and a mother, and this, in turn, makes them feel like children. In their clean-shaven androgynous bobbing, their regulation shorts and spoonable food, the juice drunk through straws, the birthday hunting, the early nights, the enforced innocence of dutiful days, they all have moments up here of a sudden obliteration of their astranout selves and a powerful sense of childhood and smallness. Their towering parent ever-present through the dome of glass (Harvey 8).

This paragraph, along with many others, evokes the symbolic and imaginative experience of lived space, as described by Lefebvre. Clearly, the cold, dark, and vast space creates the environment for human consciousness to experience feelings of memory, longing, and imagination—human qualities that connect astronauts to Earth and enable a perspective and appreciation of humanity through the lens of space, as illustrated in the paragraph below:

> No need to speak: you only have to look out through the window at a radience doubling and redoubling. The earth from here is like heaven. It flows with colour. A burst of hopeful colour. When we're on that planet we look up and think heaven is

> elsewhere, but here is what the astronauts and cosmonauts sometimes think: maybe all of us born to it have already died and are in an afterlife. If we must go to an improbable, hard-to-believe-in place when we die, that glassy, distant orb with its beautiful lonely light shows could well be it (Harvey 9).

It should not be forgotten that astronauts undergoing this experience in space, both as part of a scientific mission and as a personal, emotional, and symbolic journey, cannot separate these aspects from each other, as they are all experienced simultaneously. Lefebvre also emphasises this interconnected spatiality as follows:

> That the lived, conceived and perceived realms should be interconnected, so that the 'subject', the individual member of a given social group, may move from one to another without confusion- so much is a logical necessity (Lefebvre 40)

Samantha Harvey's Orbital is a highly significant novel in its exploration of space and spatiality, and how they shape human experience, including scientific, imaginative, creative, and symbolic dimensions. It can be said that the novel lends itself well to a Bachelardian and Lefebvrian interpretation of spatiality in its examination of humanity from various spaces and perspectives. Sadly, there has yet to be a scholarly or academic study produced on this significant work during the time this study was underway. Hoping that this study will serve as a lead to motivate such interest, it may be worthwhile to conclude by quoting the Booker Prize judges, who summarise the significance and value of Orbital as follows:

By positioning the entire planet within a single narrative frame, Orbital blurs distinctions between borders, time zones, and our own individual stories. This is a vantage point we haven't encountered in fiction before, and it is infused with such awe and reverence that it reads like an act of worship. In offering us a vision of our planet as borderless and interlinked, Harvey makes the case for the futility of territorial conflicts and the need for co-operation and respect for our shared humanity. This is a theme that couldn't be more sobering, timely, or urgent (Booker Prize.com).

Consequently, Orbital is a novel of remarkable imagination and creative power, combining advanced technological knowledge. It invites the reader to explore the vastness of space and 'snapshots of humanity' (Guardian), marvelling at our planet, Earth. The ending of the novel reaffirms its embracing message by emphasising the beauty of the Earth, its delicacy, and the fragility of man in this vast and unending universe. It is 'a love letter to our wounded planet' (Guardian), which has nurtured and sheltered humanity, offering it a stable and protective home forever. Orbital demonstrates that it deserves to be protected, cherished, and loved.

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