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**SOLARPUNK AESTHETICS IN BECKY CHAMBERS’
A PSALM FOR THE WILD-BUILT**

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Abstract

*This era can be called as Post-Anthropocene. Mankind has done innumerable, irreparable damage to Earth and have come to a realization that in order to save earth, to make it habitable for the future generation or more practically, to ensure the existence of earth as a planet, remediation is to be done. Grassroots organizations, Academicians, Scientists, Environmentalists - all are trying to improve the existing conditions of the environment. By now, humans have realized that they do not occupy the central position in the universal pedestal. They are trying to learn to coexist with the other nonhuman agents to make this world a living space. In the realm of literature, the genres science and speculative fiction offers myriad possibilities to re-envision the future of humanity. Several works are being written to instil hope in people for a better future. Becky Chambers’s novella *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* is one such work which offers a different future of humans in a faraway moon named Panga. The aim of this paper is analyze the novella as a solarpunk. The exploration of the Pangan ecosystem with all its human and nonhuman characters is made to study the template of the solarpunk genre.*

Keywords

Becky Chamber, A Psalm for the Wild-Built, Mosschap, Sibling Dex, Solarpunk y, etc.

Full Article

Humans have surpassed the era of Anthropocene and have already entered into the era of Capitalocene. Ideas for sustainable future, greener environments and environmental awareness are gaining traction in the present time because of the damages done to the planet and its components. Science and Speculative fiction, through their thought-experiments and their imaginative narratives, try to offer solutions to the existing environmental problems. Becky Chambers’ oeuvre offers hope for the future of humanity and of earth. Her novella *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* presents a setting which is far different from that of the earth. It is set in the moon Panga where each and every life form - human and nonhuman - exist in perfect harmony with each other. This paper shows the harmonious nature of the sustainable environment as presented by Becky Chambers in the novella.

The term ‘Solarpunk’ was coined by an anonymous blogger in the blog “Republic of the Bees” inspired by the cargo ship Beluga Skysail. The term caught up with the internet people and environmental activists who expanded its discussion in various online platforms such as Tumblr, Facebook. In particular, Tumblr user, missolivialouise, expanded on the topic initiating a new avenue for the discussion of environmental issues. It is a subgenre of science fiction. It shares its goals with ecocriticism. It is a critique of Capitalism and it advocates a sense of community and togetherness among people. In the realm of literature, it is a genre of hope and possibilities. Hope amidst despair remains the core of any solarpunk art. It is shaped by the cultural politics and



historical contexts. It emphasizes on the possibilities of sustainable futures based on renewable energy sources. It is a complete contrast to the existing dystopian world where community comes together to save the ecosystem. Each individual is aware of their individual responsibilities to their community.

Solarpunk literature offers hopeful, sustainable futures, with key works including Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993), Becky Chambers' *Monk & Robot Series*, Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, and anthologies like *Sunvault* and *Glass and Gardens*, focusing on renewable energy, social justice, and eco-friendly living as alternatives to dystopia, with early inspirations from authors like Ernest Callenbach and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. Anthologies include *Solarpunk: Ecological and Fantastical Stories in a Sustainable World* (2012), *Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation* (2017) and *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers* (2018). Claudie Arseaneault's *Wings of Renewal: A Solarpunk Dragon Anthology* (2015) and *Viral Waves* (2015), Wagner Phoebe and Bronte Christopher Wieland and Daniel Jose's *Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation* (2017), Sarena Ulibarri and Wendy Nickel's anthology *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers* (2018) are some of the critically acclaimed solarpunk writings. "Solarpunk ideas can be traced to earlier this decade in certain texts where the idea of this sustenance and ecological balance was found but was not identified as a part of Solarpunk literature" (Chattopadhyay, 4). Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler were writing utopian science fiction even before the term solarpunk was introduced.

It is a requisite to understand the difference between various punk genres as they all are the diversified subgenres of science fiction. Cyberpunk reflects a society which is full of capitalism and scientific technologies. Steampunk is full of technologies based on steam which is viewed as a viable alternative for electricity. Solarpunk is different from mainstream climate fiction in its purpose - its emphasis on renewable energy sources as the only option for a sustainable future. It is a future in an optimistic note where there is a perfect alliance between human and nonhuman. There is a considerable literature on Solarpunk as an art form. "Implicated throughout the Solarpunk Manifesto and other solarpunk writings are four pillars necessary for a just society: (1) social justice; (2) justice across generations; (3) justice across communities; and (4) justice for non-humans" (Gillam, 8). As Gillam points out, Solarpunk is directly related to social and environmental justice. It is full of warnings and didactic at the same time. It emphasizes learning as well acting on the lessons learned. This is exactly reflected in Becky Chambers' novella *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*.

Becky Chambers, one of the contemporary science fiction writers, has bagged all the coveted awards in the genre. Many of her works received Hugo Awards and Locus Awards. Wayfarers series and Monk & Robot series are the most popular writings in her oeuvre. Having born in an educated family of an astrobiologist and a satellite engineer, Chambers has been introduced to both - science and environmental problems even in her early age. She studied theater arts at the University of San Francisco. Her writings are more character-driven and less than plot-driven. The story moves through the interactions of characters and her language is simple and lucid which drives her point home.

It offers a hope - green future amidst the anxiety over climate, nature. It does not insist on the usage of technologies; at the same time it does not completely avoid it. Solarpunk advocates the usage of technologies that will contribute only to the sustainable future of an ecosystem. Isaijah Johnso differentiates between cyberpunk and solarpunk as follows: "Cyberpunk is perhaps most succinctly summed up in the phrase "high tech, low life," referring to the immense technological development imagined by the genre and its insurmountable social problems (Neon Dystopia). By contrast, solarpunk can be said to be "low carbon, high life." Pointedly, solarpunk



has no commitment to “low tech” as such (as, for example, anarcho-primitivism does), but rather rejects technologies which are not in harmony with the environment” (Johnso).

The story takes place in an imaginary moon named Panga, which has resolved the environmental issues in their planet. Like any other planet, it is full of various thriving life forms. In the beginning of the novella, the readers are introduced to the Post-Factory Age of Panga. Factory Age was when robots were produced in greater numbers and used for various works in factories. But the Awakening saw robots bidding farewell to humans and choosing wilderness. The Pangans have accepted the robots’ decision and granted them liberation. Panga is shown as a balanced settling where human and nonhuman forms share space; it might not be equal but it seems to be more than suffice. Fifty percent of Panga’s single continent was designated for human use; the rest was left to nature, and the ocean was barely touched at all. It was a crazy split, if you thought about it: half the land for a single species, half for the hundreds of thousands of others. But then, humans had a knack for throwing things out of balance. Finding a limit they’d stick to was victory enough” (Chambers, 18-19).

Wilderness is left untouched and the Pangans respect their nature and gods a little too much to disturb the equilibrium. The decision was taken by the people to restore balance; to make Panga inhabitable for humans in the first place. There was a ‘Parting Promise’ from the side of the robots - that they would not return to humans at all. This is the very setting in which the plot of the novella begins. This in itself a hope for humanity - where they are left on their own; they have none else to blame for whatever conditions they find themselves in.

The very setting of Panga shows how a place can be balanced, self-sustained and be properly maintained and left for futurity. The protagonist of the story is Sibling Dex, a non-binary garden monk in the Meadow Den Monastery who wishes to be a tea monk. At one point of time, he feels disillusioned with his purpose, his life. That is when he meets the robot Mosschap, which alters his perception about life. Though importance is given to nature, the scientific and technological developments are abound and flourishing in Panga. The following description shows the beautiful scenery of Panga: “The City was beautiful, it really was. A towering architectural celebration of curves and polish and colored light, laced with the connective threads of elevated rail lines and smooth footpaths, flocked with leaves that spilled lushly from every balcony and center divider, each inhaled breath perfumed with cooking spice, fresh nectar, laundry drying in the pristine air. The City was a healthy place, a thriving place. A never-ending harmony of making, doing, growing, trying, laughing, running, living. Sibling Dex was so tired of it” (Chambers, 5).

Sibling Dex feels that there is something missing in his life and decides to travel to do his duties. He chooses to be a tea monk. Even the monastery is described as a modern one, not insisting on strict religious codes of the traditional churches. The monks are allowed to choose their calling, they can choose internship or they can self-teach. They can have sexual relationships with other people. The concept of gender is neither fixed nor taken for granted. Sibling Dex chooses to leave city life because he could not find any crickets in his area. The entire city is full various insects but the absence of crickets affects him the most. This might be simple at the outset but it is deeply psychological and connected with human’s equation with the environment. The most important thing in the novella is that Panga is shown as the place which regards all life forms equally. The Pangans have not destroyed nature in the name of development. It is a conscious choice from their part. At the same time, the place is full of tall buildings, skyscrapers signaling development; the city is full of sounds of monorails, wind turbines and sights of solar panels and solar batteries.

The contradiction between science and religion also exists in Panga, but in a very practical way. The readers will be amused to find gods for almost everything in a story that has robots. God



of robots - Chal, God of cycles, changes - Bosh, God of small comforts - Allalae (Chambers, 9), God of the Inanimate - Grylom, God of Threads - Trikilli (Chambers, 30). Even the vehicle he uses is very practical, sustainable and environment friendly. “It was, as commissioned, an ox-bike wagon: double-decked, chunky-wheeled, ready for adventure. An object of both practicality and inviting aesthetics” (Chambers, 10). It is completely electric based and there is very less chance of pollution from it. “The roof was capped with shiny thermovoltaic coating, and a pint-sized wind turbine was bolted jauntily to one side. . . . Both freshwater tank and greywater filter hugged the wagon’s base, their complicated inner workings tucked away behind pontoon-like casings” (Chambers, 11). This seems to be the standard for bike wagons in Panga. Even the duty of a tea monk is to offer comfort along with his brew to people. People come to him with problems and he has to offer solace to them. At first, he was not successful in his endeavour but soon he becomes the best tea monk in Panga and earns everyone’s respect. Another important thing is everywhere he chooses a space for his tea wagon, it is full of greenery.

All the cities are planned in such a way to utilize the available space that could be split up properly for living and production. For instance, the description of the city Little Creek invites appreciation from the readers: “Little Creek was arranged in a circle. The outer ring was farmland, packed thick with mixed grazing grasses and fruit trees and spring crops, with mixed grazing grasses and fruit trees and spring crops all working in concrete to create chemical magic in the soil below...Beyond the farmland lay the residential ring, filled with homes that belonged to either single families or multiple ones, depending on preference” (Chambers, 20).

Even the people in Panga are very conscious about their ecosystem and Sibling Dex is the best example of this: “They rarely used the lights up there, preferring instead to slide open the rooftop shade. They fell asleep in the starlight, breathing in the muddled snap of a hundred spices, listening to the gurgle of water pumps feeding happy roots in little pots” (Chambers, 23). Everywhere the landscapes are full of milky green hot springs, solar farms and wind blades. The Pangans treat their lands as a living thing in a real sense. “A forest floor, the Woodland villagers knew, is a living thing...the human residents of this place were judicious about what constituted actual necessity, and as such, disturbed the ground as little as possible” (Chambers, 26). Trees fully cover the landscapes and they are like specific individuals by themselves.

At the same time, everyone is well aware of the technologies in the society. Everyone has their pocket computers through which they access all the information ranging from buying tea to building something. Sibling Dex yearns to listen to the sound of the crickets. When Dex starts to explore wilderness, he is excited and cautious at the same time. The trees there are taller than the city buildings illuminated only by the sunlight. Dex finds this experience exhilarating. At the same time, he is aware of the dangers of going off-trail for the sake of exploration and adventure.

Enter the second protagonist Mosschap, the assembled wild-built robot who has come to know the status of humans after their parting promise. The various views of nature is projected through the interactions between these two characters - Sibling Dex and Mosschap. For instance, when a bloodsuck lands on Dex’s shoulders, he wipes it off and apologises to the bug. The robot is confused by this and so it asks whether Dex has apologised to all the plants he is cooking. Now, Dex looks confused. This simple interaction shows the biased or prejudiced ideology of human and nonhuman among the humans.

This is the first time Dex seeing a robot and so he does not know what to do as he has only heard about them in stories. Dex thinks that robots run on oil but they run on solar batteries: “Solar power wasn’t mainstream when we left, but it was around, and one of the manufacturers of the associated hardware provided us with these before our departure so we wouldn’t have to rely on human fuel” (Chambers, 57). The Pangans have thought about the efficiency of robots and their fuel sources for their future. There is a beautiful discussion about gods between the two



characters. Mossccap echoes human belief the god is everywhere; it believes this because it is made by a human. Dex finds this conflicting as it comes from a robot. Mossccap says, “But as for the gods themselves, they’re everywhere and in everything. . . Surely, you know this.” (Chambers, 60). Mossccap decides to accompany Dex on his journey to Hart’s Brow Hermitage.

It is also a contradiction when Mossccap says that many robots have chosen to spend time with nature as their vocation and hobby. For instance, a robot named Two Foxes is interested learning about bird behaviour. Fire Nettle has chosen to watch a seed grow into a sapling, it has disappeared into mountains. Another robot named Black Marbled Frostfrog has been watching stalagmites for nearly three and a half decades. Whenever Dex faces an obstacle in his journey, Mossccap always offers to help him. But Dex refuses in the view that Mossccap is just a robot and that it is not right to get his help. But Mossccap helps him anyway and asks Sibling Dex to treat it like a friend and not as a machine. This simple erasure of boundary shows the posthuman thought that underlines the novella ever since the arrival of Mossccap into the narrative. Mossccap tells Dex, “you see me as more person than object, even though that’s very, very wrong, but you can’t see me as a friend, even though I’d like to be?” (Chambers, 83). Talking about the destruction of ecosystem, Sibling Dex laments about the damage that can be done by a single person to the whole system. At the same time, Mossccap offers a different and a practical view: “It’s a fine lesson in trampling. Sometimes, damage is unavoidable. Often, in fact. I assure you we’ve both killed countless tiny things in just the last few steps we’ve taken” (Chambers, 85). Talking about their places in the ecosystem, Mossccap says they both are equal. It tells Dex, “I would never call you just an animal, Sibling Dex. . . We don’t have to fall into the same category to be of equal value” (Chambers, 69).

The decay system was neatly planned and managed by the Pangans. Any building which is decaying will be reabsorbed by the land: Decay was a built-in function of the City’s towers, crafted from translucent casein and mycelium masonry. Those walls would, in time, begin to decompose, at which point they’d either be repaired by materials grown for that express purpose, or, if the building was no longer in use, be reabsorbed into the landscape that had hosted it for a time (Chambers, 90).

Mossccap also discusses about Winn’s Paradox with Sibling Dex which is the basis for the sustenance and the balance of an ecosystem. Winn’s Paradox is about how far can be used to maintain harmony in an ecosystem; how every being looks out for itself and its progeny - preying and becoming prey. “So, the paradox is that the ecosystem as a whole needs its participants to act with restraint in order to avoid collapse, but the participants themselves have no inbuilt mechanism to encourage such behaviour other than fear” (Chambers, 96). At one point, Mossccap hesitates to cut thyme for Dex’s cooking; it says that it has not done something like that before and this shows the moral codes that were established for the robots in the Factory Age. Another thing to be noted is that when the robots expressed their wish to leave humanity and enter wilderness, the humans did not object to this. At the same time, robots also followed the codes and laws since their primary duty was to be of assistance to humans in the first place. A kind of mutual understanding exists between both the species - robots and humans. Mossccap is the chosen one to return to humans to know about human’s need and how they cope without robots during all these times.

And the beauty is that the humans have never touched the wilderness; they have left it completely. They did not destroy or rebuild the wilderness in the name of development. While trekking, Dex and Mossccap come across several roads incapable for human travels. Mossccap assists Dex in these paths. Chambers describes this using a beautiful phrase “the anarchy of untouched forest” (Chambers, 127). The characters find beauty in the decaying building and this is the proof that everything is reborn in Panga. This is found in the description of the Hart’s Brow



hermitage. The dwelling is sustainable and fine but it has been abandoned for a greater time and everything is covered in dust. Everything is there for use but they are to be cleaned first. Mosschap prepares tea from one of the cups it finds in the Monastery kitchen. It even learns to prepare fire using stones using a technique it reads from one of the library books.

The ultimate message of the novella comes in the last few pages where Dex and Mosschap discuss about one's purpose in life. Dex has been vexed as he could not find his purpose; but his perception on life changes when he meets Mosschap. Mosschap tells him that it is simple enough to live in this world; to exist to marvel and wonder at the beauties of the universe. Dex realises being cautious and conscious of one's actions towards oneself and to one's surroundings, ecosystem is one's greater purpose in life. "Félix Guattari broadened the principle of autopoiesis (originally coined by Varela to refer to biological organisms only) to cover also the machines or allopoietic systems of technological others" (Braidotti, 31). Pangan system is a perfect mix of autopoiesis and allopoiesis. Even during the factory age, the machines did not create any problems or conflicts with mankind. They understood their purpose - they were created to serve mankind in the first place. But after spending a lot of time with humans, they come to a realization that there are other forms of life than humans. Hence, many of the robots decide to spend their time in nature. A special applause has to be given to the Pangans for not intervening with the decision of the robots. The robots are inspired and influenced by other living forms in nature - plants, insects, water sources, etc. This reminds of the definition of posthumanism as given by Pramod Nayar: 'radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines' (2, emphasis in original). The Pangans are indeed posthumans in the real sense as projected by Chambers.

Many things in the novella are real life solutions to many problems that plague humans. Solar panels, solar powered batteries, water purifiers, electric wagons, solar mats, pocket computers, etc. Even though these items are not new to humans, the question of their effectiveness remains at large. Also, the division of the landscape for humans and for wildlife (flora and fauna) seems to be so effective for maintaining a balance in the ecosystem. This is the crux of a solarpunk aesthetic. This is in fact the need of the hour. "According to the recent Global Map of Environmental Conflicts, the generation of energy driven by consumption to feed the accumulation of capital makes countries like India, Brazil, China, the United States and Colombia the five nations with the highest number of environmental conflicts on the planet" (Reina-Rozo, 57). These nations should have a backup plan to get back on track. Stories like *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* shows there is always hope for mankind to coexist in harmony with other life forms. Real life solar punk examples are also abounding in the present time. Milan's Bosco Verticale, Garden by the Bay in Singapore, urban farms in Tokyo's Machinaka, Spain's ecommunity Calafou are real life examples of sustainable development using renewable energy and decentralized ecosystems in the hope of building a greater future. After the impact of COVID 19, there seems to be a heightened sense of awareness regarding living and existence among humans. This sense of awareness and consciousness is found in the novella. There is no authoritarian role, no centralized power, no insistence on binaries, ecological awareness, sense of community, balance between technology and nature, emphasis on the usage of renewable energy sources, etc. - all these make the novella a proper solarpunk aesthetic in itself.

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