



The Beauty of 'Becomings' in Becky Chambers' *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*

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Abstract

*Science fiction proves to be the best platform to talk about the concept of 'becoming'. With the presence of an 'Other', the 'Self' finds itself in a position to negotiate the process of identity formation. The alarm for environmental crisis is blaring in the present times and it becomes inevitable to examine the place or situatedness of humans in this vast earth. The present era is identified as Post-Anthropocene, where humans strive to establish a symbiotic relationship, a kind of mutualism with the environment with both the human and nonhuman forms. Becky Chambers ouvre explore this symbiotic relationship between the human and the Other. Her novels show how various life forms imbibe the art of becoming. This paper is an attempt to read Becky Chambers' *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* through the theoretical framework of becoming as postulated by Deleuze and Felixand Guattari.*

Keywords: A psalm for the wild-built, mosscap, becoming, becky chambers, identity

Becky Chambers bagged the most coveted award in science fiction - Hugo award. She won it for her *Wayfarers* series and another Hugo award-winning novella *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*. Her fiction can be categorised as soft science fiction as she concentrates on the effect of science, technologies on human nature rather than the scientific part. Her works come under the sub-genre hopepunk. With early exposure to space and science, Becky Chambers was inspired to pen stories that explored humans' relationship with their environment. Her

plots are character driven with lucid language to add to the story development. Philosophical explorations are abound in her science fiction which in itself is a beautiful paradox. *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* (2021) is a thorough analysis of human nature, its equation with the ecosystem, humans' relationship with the non-human forms, etc. It gained prominence for rendering one of the famous robotic characters Mossca. This paper uses the concept of becoming as elucidated by postmodernists Giles Deleuze and Felixand Felix Guattari to analyse the formation of



identity which happens through the interaction between one's Self and its Other.

Various robotic fictions have struck the right cord with the readers such as Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*, Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot*, *The Bicentennial Man*, T. J. Klune's *In the Lives of Puppets*, etc. Fictional cinematic robots such as R2-D2 in the movie series *Star Wars*, the most popular T-800 of *Terminator*, Robocap and Sonny and VIKI from *I, Robot* movie have left an indelible mark in their wake. In Karel Capek's *R.U.R.*, robots fight for their freedom. In Chambers' *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, they have achieved that much craved freedom and they wish to continue a symbiotic relationship with the ecosystem.

The novella is about Sibling Dex, a garden monk who decides to become a tea monk. Sibling Dex is a non binary monk using the pronoun 'they' in the novel. He rejects internship and prefers self-teaching. He fails in his first attempt but gradually learns the trick of the trade and becomes the master of the trade one day. Even then, there is a void in him that seeks a closure. Enter Mosschap, one of the wild-built robots from wilderness to know about humans after their parting promise. The novella is full of philosophical ruminations about one's identity, relationship with other living and non living forms, ecological responsibilities.

. . . the meaning of the fictional robot and its interactions becomes questionable when seen from the perspective of real-world ontologies: does the machine refer to typical problems of human society and interhuman relationships, shown as an extremely marked Other, or does it represent the reality or future of the developing technologies and human-machine interaction? (Viidalepp 22)

The novella opens with the introduction about the decision of robots to leave humanity and choosing wilderness to wear out their existence. During the Factory Age, they were mass produced and replaced humans in many manual works. But one day, they decide not to be the slaves for humans and disappear. There was a Parting Promise - the robots would not return to humans at all. The setting

is Panga, the moon which is in the process of restoring a balance between various life forms in its ecosystem. Sibling Dex is a city-born and he comes to hate the cities at one point of time.

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)

Chambers' choice of words create the expected emotion in the readers. At one of time, every one must have had this thought for sure. Sibling Dex misses the sound of crickets the most; he feels suffocated in the city and hence he decides to explore the villages a little bit. With his all-containing ox-bike wagon, Sibling Dex begins his journey of becoming a tea monk. The main duty of a tea monk is to offer solace to people through his/her brews. His first customer is a woman who has lost her cat. He fails to provide comfort to that woman and this makes him the more determined to become a successful tea monk. Over time, he achieves his aim. He visits Little Creek where he learns a lot about tea making and experiments with several flavours.

Panga is shown as a balanced ecosystem where there is no dearth for greenery. The following description of Little Creek shows the planned construction of the village:

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)



Dex stayed there for three months and hooks up with the herb farmer, quite a normal thing in Panga. He uses natural light, sleeps in the moonlight, uses the rooftop shade. Two years of travelling around the country, earning the status of 'The Best Tea Monk in Panga'. Sibling Dex has it all. Milky green hot springs, Solar farms, Wind blades a life surrounded by nature fully - the scenes would be different in different villages and he never misses an opportunity to appreciate them. After the departure of the robots, the Pangan people made severe changes in their ecosystem:

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)

The entire Pangan populace are very conscious and aware about their treatment of their ecosystem: "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). At the same time, technology also find its way and there is a proper balance between nature and technology. Everyone has their pocket computers, everything right from time to their activities are coded in their computers.

Sibling Dex feels lost despite doing very well in his life. The absence of crickets, for some unknown reason, adds to his dismay. He feels that his life has no purpose and goes from place to place in search of peace until one day, he meets Mosschap. Mosschap, the seven-foot robot (Chambers 50) becomes the companion of Sibling Dex. Mosschap has returned to humans to know about their situation - how they are coping up without robots. It chooses to accompany Sibling Dex in his journey to find the meaning of his life.

Mosschap is built for the wilderness and it is not factory made. The full name of the robot is "Splendid

Speckled Mosschap" (Chambers 55). The tradition followed in the naming of the robot is when it wakes up, it takes the name of the first thing it sees. In this case, the robot has seen the mushroom and is named thus. During its time with Sibling Dex, Mosschap gets to know many things about humans. It keeps asking questions and learns cooking from Dex. It helps Dex to stop a water leakage in his wagon and has endless discourses with him. Similarly, Sibling Dex gets to know about the robots through Mosschap. In the process, he also realises more about himself. "Chambers invites readers to question their presumptions and prejudices and envision a world in which machines and humans can coexist harmoniously" (Janisha and Jimsy 1681).

Mosschap tells Dex about his friends - Fire Nettle, who walked up to a mountain one day and never been seen for six years. It was watching a seed grow into a sapling. Another robot named Black Marbled Frostfrog who watches stalagmites in a cave for three and a half decades. The ultimate paradox is that all the robots are attracted to nature and spend their time watching insects, plants, etc. Mosschap was a part of a trio comprised of Milton's Millipede and Pollen Cloud; but they did not share same interest, so it split up from them. The idea of choosing Mosschap to return to humans was unanimous at the gathering in Meteor Lake. They communicate through caches: "Weather proof boxes we leave written messages in. We have fifty-two thousand, nine hundred and thirty-six of them" (Chambers 72-73). They can sense the signal of the caches and that is how they communicate among them. Dex is astonished as he believed that robots follow strict rules and structures and there comes Mosschap who just goes with the flow like some humans. Dex becomes more and more connected with the nature.

The novella shows how Sibling Dex is in the process of becoming Other with his connection with the nature and Mosschap. Mosschap, on the other hand, becomes more than a machine. It understands more about humans and acquires human nature at one point. This is more than a mere identity formation. Sibling Dex tries to avoid the robot's help till the very end. Mosschap asks him to see it as his friend:



“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). Mosschap remembers its first duty - to help humans in any way. Sibling Dex continuously tries to show the difference between him and Mosschap to which Mosschap replies, “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). This statement shows how aware Mosschap is of its being. On the other hand, Sibling Dex, is not sure about what he is or what he wants. When they discuss about gods, Mosschap says that they are made to think that god is everywhere as they are manufactured by humans in the first place. Sibling Dex asserts that god is in all beings. This statement shows that robots are not very different from the humans who made them. The consciousness of the robots are very similar to that of humans, making them more humane in nature. Mosschap finds it difficult to harm other things, even a small plant for that matter.

Instances where Dex treat Mosschap as a human shows how much of the conditioning is done in the case of humans. Dex could not eat his food without offering to one who is next to him. It is a familial/cultural expectation of feeding a guest or someone who has helped them in cooking. Though it is beyond logic, Dex makes Mosschap accept the plate of food he offers to it. Mosschap accepts it anyway. Mosschap is a product of assemblage; it is made from several robotic parts from various robots. Sibling Dex questions it regarding the breakage of the originals from the Factory Age, to which Mosschap replies that, “Everything else breaks down and is made into other things.” (Chambers 94). It simply quotes the law of the nature - the decay of a human body and how it becomes transformed and mingled with the soil thereby beginning a new cycle. Finally, when Dex vents out to Mosschap regarding his lack of purpose, Mosschap assures him that there is no need of purpose in one’s life, mere living becomes one’s purpose. “. . . it is enough to exist in the world and marvel at it. You don’t need to justify that, or earn it. You are allowed to just *live*. That is all most animals

do” (Chambers 139). Sibling Dex has his epiphany, he gets his purpose from a nonhuman perspective. Together, they continue their journey.

The novella explores the human-robot interaction through the lens of posthumanism. The plot shows the theme of interconnected between various living and non-living forms in the environment. Both the characters are becoming something more than their selves. Deleuze and Felix define becoming as follows: “Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree. . . Becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to, “appearing,” “being,” “equaling,” or “producing”” (239). Both Sibling Dex and Mosschap, understand themselves better and also realises their places in the larger scheme of things. “Chambers’s work suggests that kinship and understanding arise not from shared essence or total comprehension, but from the act of moving alongside one another with openness, humility, and sustained attention” (Aparna 247). This is what becoming is all about. This reminds of the Alan Turing experiment, the question of a machine becoming a human. “According to Turing, if a machine acts as intelligently as a human being, we should apply the polite convention to machines as well, and politely convene: yes, machines can think” (Ferrando 145). Mosschap stands as a perfect example of this situation. Posthumanism is a kind of self-awareness and self-consciousness. Robert Pepperell sums up the posthumanism by his following statements:

1. It is now clear that Humans are no longer the most important things in the Universe. This is something the Humanists have yet to accept.
2. All technological progress of Human society is geared towards the redundancy of the Human species as we currently know it.
3. In the Posthuman era many beliefs become redundant—not least the belief in Human Being.
4. Human beings, like Gods, only exist in as much as we believe them to exist. (177)

Sibling Dex realises this finally. He is on his way to become more than his mere human self. He understands that he has always been in a symbiotic



relationship with his environment and he has been performing his humanity as Mosschap has been performing its machinic nature. Karen L.F. Houle in her chapter “Symmetry and Asymmetry in Conceptual and Morphological Formations: The difference plant body growth can make to human thought”: “‘Becoming’ is the term Deleuze and Felix and Guattari use to name the process by which a primordially differentiating reality enters into compositions and decompositions, giving rise to ‘another power’. What is this *other power*? The capacity to mutate; to be or do something other than what one is or does: to *differentiate*” (94). In this case, Sibling Dex is in a composite, symbiotic relationship with his environment and also with Mosschap. This is vice versa for Mosschap as its only contact with the human world.

Deleuze and Felix and Guattari’s idea of becoming shows that there is no one fixed identity. Rather, there are identities, which are born out of the result of the interaction of a subject with various elements of one’s environment; the interaction between two different entities which results in the consciousness and awareness on both the sides. “Becoming-animal is only one becoming among others. A kind of order or apparent progression can be established for the segments of becoming in which we find ourselves; becoming-woman, becoming-child; becoming-animal, -vegetable, or -mineral; becomings-molecular of all kinds, becomings-particles” (Deleuze and Felix 272). Mosschap tries to understand human’s feelings and thoughts - how they are coping without the intervention of the robots. This mere act shows that Mosschap is trying to erase the boundary that exists between itself and the humans, Sibling Dex in this case. The character of Sibling Dex shows a greater connection with nature. He enjoys being surrounded by nature rather than by buildings.

Humanism has placed much importance on the category of humans. Posthumanism questions this centrality for it decenters the position of human as a category with its connection with other life forms such as plants, animals, machines, technologies. Technology has become an inevitable part in human lives ranging from smart watches, smart phones,

biometric sensors to IVF, cloning, gene mapping, etc. All these only show that humans can be easily made anew. Michel Foucault was right when he declared that the age of humans was coming to an end. Rene Descartes’ assertion “I think, therefore I am” holds true for machines in the present time. Robots are used in various sectors - companies, manual works, service industries, home cleaning devices. There is even an ongoing debate about the nature of soul in animals. The hierarchical binary system holds no place in the age of pluralities. Multiplicity is the essence of this postmodern era which is also posthumanist and postanthropocentric. Becky Chambers’ A Psalm for the Wild-Built is a beautiful example of mutual becomings evolved as a result of inevitable symbiosis between various life forms in an ecosystem.

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