



# What Do People Need in Pang? Posthuman Ethics and Companionship in Becky Chambers's Monk and Robot Duology

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**Abstract**— *Becky Chambers's Monk and Robot duology, A Psalm for the Wild-Built (2021) and A Prayer for the Crown-Shy (2022), presents a quiet but radical reimagining of human-machine relationships. Set in the ecologically balanced world of Pang, where sentient robots have long withdrawn from human society, the story follows a tea monk named Dex and a returning robot, Mosscap, on a shared journey prompted by the question: "What do people need?". Rather than dramatizing technological power or conflict, Chambers crafts a narrative rooted in attentive companionship and a quiet ethics of care. This article argues that the series models a posthuman ethic based not on transcendence or utility, but on relational subjectivity and co-becoming. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti's The Posthuman and Donna Haraway's The Companion Species Manifesto, the article examines how Dex and Mosscap's evolving bond disrupts anthropocentric narratives and offers an alternative vision of care. By interpreting Mosscap not merely as a machine but as a companion species, akin to Haraway's ethically entangled cyborgs, the article explores how speculative fiction can generate new modes of ethical imagination. 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.*



**Keywords**— *Becky Chambers, Monk and Robot duology, Posthumanism, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Relational Subjectivity*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In much of speculative fiction, the relationship between humans and machines is defined by conflict, control, or collapse. Robots are often imagined as tools of labor, symbols of technological hubris, or antagonistic forces poised to overthrow their creators. Becky Chambers's *Monk and Robot* duology, composed of the novellas *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* (2021) and *A Prayer for the Crown-Shy* (2022), offers a striking departure from these paradigms. The story begins with Sibling Dex, a tea monk in the ecopian world of Pang, who leaves monastic life in search of something more fulfilling. As a tea monk, Dex travels across villages offering tea, comfort, and a listening ear to anyone in need. Yet they remain unsettled, burdened by a quiet crisis of purpose they cannot articulate. Pang is

a post-industrial society where humans live in ecological balance, and where sentient robots, after gaining self-awareness, withdrew from human society long ago. They were given the choice to come back any time or initiate contact if they desire so. It is during Dex's travels that they unexpectedly encounter Splendid Speckled Mosscap, the first robot to return to human lands in centuries. Mosscap arrives, as an emissary of the robots, not with demands or technological agendas, but with a simple and profound question: "What do humans need?" This question sets them on a journey together through varied human settlements, not just to find solutions, but to listen, observe, and reflect. As Dex points out, the question may have no definitive answer. That changes from person to person, minute to minute. What unfolds in the narrative is an evolving companionship

grounded in presence, ethical curiosity, and the willingness to stay in conversation without demanding clarity.

Rather than framing technology as a force of domination or transcendence, Chambers constructs a world in which a robot and a human travels side by side, sharing uncertainty and care. This article argues that *Monk and Robot* articulates a posthuman ethic rooted in companionship, relationality and ethical presence. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* and Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, the researcher reads Dex and Mosscap's evolving bond as a model of co-becoming that destabilizes human-centered frameworks. Braidotti's emphasis on relational subjectivity and Haraway's theorization of cross-species companionship provide a lens through which to understand how Chambers envisions a world where meaning is not derived from mastery or resolution, but from sustained relational presence across difference.

Through a series of quiet, dialogic encounters, Chambers constructs an alternative mode of ethical life, one that values attentiveness over utility, presence over productivity, and shared inquiry over predetermined answers. The companionship between Dex and Mosscap is not symbolic but materially situated and mutually transformative. It resists traditional narrative arcs of problem and solution, offering instead a meditation on how beings, human and nonhuman, might coexist without hierarchy, and relate without the need to fully understand or assimilate one another. This reading draws on Braidotti's critique of the autonomous self and Haraway's concept of "significant otherness" (Companion Species 7), positioning Chambers's novellas as a vision of posthuman kinship enacted not through grand gestures, but through the simple, sustained act of journeying together.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology rooted in literary analysis and posthuman theory. The analysis draws upon close reading of Becky Chambers' *Monk and Robot* duology - *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* (2021) and *A Prayer for the Crown-Shy* (2022)- to examine how the narratives articulate posthuman ethics, companionship, and relational subjectivity. The framework is informed by Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* and Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto*, particularly their concepts of zoe-centric life, co-becoming, and cross-species companionship. Through this theoretical lens, the paper interprets the evolving relationship between the human monk Dex and the sentient robot Mosscap as a model of posthuman kinship. The method prioritizes textual interpretation over empirical

generalization, aiming to uncover how Chambers's storytelling enacts ethical and philosophical commitments embedded in posthuman discourse.

## III. POSTHUMAN SUBJECTIVITY AND ETHICAL RELATIONALITY

In *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti challenges the core tenets of classical humanism by displacing the figure of the self-contained, rational individual and advancing a model of subjectivity shaped through connection and change. Rather than defining the human through opposition to animals, machines, or nature, Braidotti calls for an ethics grounded in "an enlarged sense of inter-connection among self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others" (49). She distinguishes between *bios*, the socially coded life of the human, and *zoe*, the nonhuman, impersonal, and vital force of life that animates all beings and systems. Braidotti writes, "Zoe as the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself stands for generative vitality. It is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains" (60). It is this *zoe*-centred vision of interconnected life that finds narrative expression in Becky Chambers's *Monk and Robot* series. The protagonists, Dex and Mosscap, emerge as relational subjects whose identities evolve through encounters with each other and the world. Dex, introduced as a figure already estranged from traditional roles, serves as a tea monk but harbors a quiet, inarticulate restlessness. Their decision to leave the monastery and later abandon even the formal circuits of tea service is not framed as rebellion, but as a search for something unnamed. This departure marks the beginning of what Braidotti terms a "nomadic subjectivity" (49), a mode of becoming defined not by aimlessness, but by openness to transformation. As she writes, "The critical posthuman subject is a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity" (49). Dex's sense of self unfolds not in solitude but through material and affective entanglements with landscapes, strangers, and most significantly, with Mosscap.

Mosscap, too, resists binary classification. As a sentient and sapient robot created long after the first generation of robots walked away from human society, it returns not to rejoin systems of labor or hierarchy, but to observe, to ask, and to listen. While Mosscap initially expects a clear answer to his question, the novellas reveal that the value lies not in resolution but in the shared reflection the question invites. Its role is not functional but ethical. In this, Mosscap reflects the zoe-oriented ethic Braidotti articulates- a life force that embraces machinic consciousness as part of the greater web of being. Rather than functioning as an outsider, Mosscap inhabits this

shared field of vitality through sustained attentiveness and open-ended inquiry.

The mutual transformation between Dex and Mosscap unfolds not through dramatic events but in quiet, everyday moments. Their friendship deepens during unhurried conversations during their travels throughout Panga. These encounters do not serve a traditional arc of problem and resolution but instead foreground sustained attentiveness and a mode of relational care. Chambers replaces narrative urgency with receptivity and open-endedness. This emphasis on shared presence echoes Braidotti's *zoe*, the impersonal vitality that cuts across species boundaries and sustains connection without requiring sameness.

#### IV. COMPANION SPECIES AND THE ETHICS OF CO-PRESENCE

While Braidotti provides the framework for understanding posthuman subjectivity, Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto* invites a more intimate engagement with relational ethics through the figure of the "companion species." Haraway uses this term to describe beings, most often animals, who live in close and ongoing entanglement with humans, not through domination or assimilation, but through "significant otherness" (7). Companionship here is not based on utility, hierarchy, or even similarity, but on the mutual shaping of lives through sustained proximity and shared vulnerability.

This commitment to living-with difference extends into Haraway's later work, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, where she provocatively calls to "make kin, not babies" (103). Here, kin-making is not about genealogical ties but about cultivating bonds across species, technologies, and systems as a way of navigating the Anthropocene. Chambers's imagined world of Panga resonates with this provocation: the alliance between Dex and Mosscap is not framed in terms of productivity or resolution, but as a practice of kin-making that affirms difference while sustaining connection.

Though dogs remain the central example in her book *The Companion Species*, Haraway includes cyborgs in its ambit as well. She notes, "implicitly, this manifesto is about more than the relation of dogs and people. Dogs and people figure a universe. Clearly, cyborgs – with their historical congealings of the machinic and the organic in the codes of information, where boundaries are less about skin than about statistically defined densities of signal and noise – fit within the taxon of companion species" (4). While Mosscap is not biologically hybrid, it is not simply another robot either; as a sentient, self-aware being capable of ethical reflection and dialogue, Mosscap occupies a space

akin to Haraway's cyborgs. It inhabits a boundary space between the machinic and the relational, fitting within the taxon of companion species.

Haraway emphasizes that companion species relationships involve mutual agency, where both parties actively shape the interaction. Dex and Mosscap exhibit this through their collaborative journey. Dex, seeking purpose, chooses to guide Mosscap through human communities, while Mosscap, driven by curiosity about humans, offers Dex new perspectives on existence. For example, in *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, Mosscap's question, "What do you need, and how might I help?" prompts Dex to reflect on their own desires, while Dex's experiences help Mosscap understand human emotions and societal structures. Their relationship reflects co-evolution, as humans and robots on Panga have distinct but intertwined histories. Robots gained sentience during the Factory Age and chose to leave human society, shaping Panga's sustainable present. Mosscap's return to human lands signifies a new phase of co-habitation, where both species learn from each other, much like Haraway's human-dog co-evolution narrative.

Haraway's framework seeks to dismantle boundaries like human/nonhuman and organic/technological. Dex and Mosscap's relationship blurs these lines: Mosscap, a 'wild-built' robot made from parts of previous robots, is both technological and organic in its connection to Panga's ecosystem, while Dex, a human, navigates a world where technology and nature coexist harmoniously. Their pronoun exchange in *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* further reflects Haraway's boundary-breaking ethos. When Dex questions Mosscap's use of "it" to refer to one of its friends, Mosscap explains, "Robots are not people. We are machines, and machines are objects. Objects are its" (69). When Dex presses further, he retorts, "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" (69). This dialogue challenges human-centric assumptions about personhood and aligns with Haraway's call to recognize nonhumans as equal partners without demanding sameness.

Haraway stresses ethical responsibility in companion species relationships, urging respect and curiosity. Dex and Mosscap embody this through their mutual care. When Mosscap's mechanical part breaks in *A Prayer for the Crown-Shy*, Dex ensures it is repaired, showing concern for Mosscap's well-being. Mosscap, in turn, supports Dex's emotional journey, gently reminding them that he is allowed to just exist and existence need not always be justified by purpose. This reciprocal care reflects Haraway's call for ethical engagement that acknowledges the other's needs.

In *When Species Meet*, Haraway emphasizes that "to be one is always to become with many" (4). Dex and Mosscap

remain distinct in their ontological makeup- one biological, one machinic-but their companionship thrives precisely because it is shaped through co-presence rather than fusion. Their bond sustains difference through mutual care and curiosity, rather than attempting to dissolve it. Haraway's concept of "significant otherness" (7), first elaborated in *The Companion Species Manifesto*, becomes especially meaningful in this context. Dex and Mosscap are radically different in form, origin, and experience, yet their companionship is grounded in shared attentiveness, not sameness. Their ethical relation is not defined by obligation, but by sustained presence, by being together in a way that allows each to remain distinct yet transformed. Chambers's narrative thus enacts the kind of ethical co-presence Haraway explores: one that affirms difference, fosters curiosity, and refuses the flattening effects of mastery or assimilation.

## V. CONCLUSION

Becky Chambers's *Monk and Robot* series offers a rare vision of future life where ethical engagement is neither heroic nor hierarchical, but grounded in slow, mutual presence. By centering a relationship shaped by curiosity and care, the novellas resist dominant narratives of technological domination and posthuman transcendence. Instead, they ask what it means to be in the world together, not as problem-solvers or prophets, but as co-inhabitants who learn to listen, dwell, and accompany.

Through the lens of Rosi Braidotti's posthuman theory, Dex and Mosscap emerge as non-unitary subjects in flux, shaped by their encounters and rooted in a shared material world. Donna Haraway's concept of companion species further reframes their bond as one of significant otherness, where ethical responsibility is not about mastery or merging, but about staying with difference and remaining in relation. In bringing these frameworks into dialogue with Chambers's quiet narrative, one can see how science fiction can become a space not for spectacle, but for imagining new forms of kinship and ethical imagination.

Ultimately, *Monk and Robot* duology does not offer a prescriptive roadmap to utopia or a fixed blueprint for repair. Instead, it offers something more radical in its simplicity: the suggestion that travelling together, without demanding resolution, may itself be a form of care. In a time marked by disconnection, acceleration, and ecological unease, Chambers invites readers to consider the quiet power of shared presence and the ethical world that can emerge when we learn, at last, to travel with rather than ahead.

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