

## Elizabeth Bishop and the Watery Discourse: The *Semiotic Chora* at play

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### Abstract

*This paper theorizes the use of water imagery in Elizabeth Bishop's selected postmodern poetry namely, "The Map", "The Imaginary Iceberg" and "The Man-Moth". Speaking in the language of tears, lake, bay, river, strait, sea and ocean, Bishop personifies water for culture and its language. It is on this basis that Bishop comes close to the French psychoanalyst and linguist, Julia Kristeva's concept of the semiotic chora. Kristeva calls it a space of maternal discourse, where the fluid realm of mother's body called chora celebrates the fluidity of semiotic desires and expresses them through the symbolic language of the world outside her body. Bishop revisits this bodily space, time and again, to acquire subjectivity through the mother/child bond. Bishop's poetic language celebrates this relationship between the semiotic (maternal) and symbolic (paternal) realm of language. The symbolic enables the semiotic to express itself, and the semiotic shatters the rigidity of the symbolic meanings through an ongoing process of signification. This reciprocity, through the semiotic chora, makes Bishop's identity fluid and always in motion towards multiplicity. This plurality brings newness to Bishop's poetry and engages the researcher with fresh perspectives of outer vision, inner perception, structural patterns and make her poetry eventful.*

**Keywords:** Womanhood, Semiotic Chora, Plurality, Symbolic, Multiplicity

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### Introduction

This paper explores Elizabeth Bishop's water imagery in her poems – "The Map", "The Imaginary Iceberg" and "The Man-Moth" – to constitute Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic concept

of womanhood through it. Kristeva theorized this concept of womanhood through the process of the semiotic *chora* (*The Revolution in Poetic Language*, 1984, p. 26). In her seminal work, *Revolution in Poetic Language*,

she states that through the bodily space of the semiotic *chora*, on one hand, women will conform to the norms of the feminine body by performing their biological duties; on the other hand, they will contribute positively as thinking beings to the making of a culture (Kristeva, 1984, p. 26). Such flexibility within female constitutes the concept of womanhood - the plurality of being - which Bishop strives for in her poetry through her use of water imagery.

Elizabeth Bishop's water images represent the fluid body of women by which, Kristeva claims, they can constitute subjectivity. An exile all her life, Bishop is interested in the boundaries, which encourage plurality of existence. Jonathan Ellis highlights how she agreed that "Yes, all my life I have lived and behaved very much like/ that sandpiper – just running along the edges of different/ countries and continents, looking for something" (*Elizabeth Bishop: Modern Critical Views*, 1985, p. 468).

Elizabeth Bishop's journey of life has been that of a voyager who continued to be fascinated with the contours of land and sea. Therefore, in

several Bishop poems there are explicit references to women being related to fluid water. For instance, in "The Imaginary Iceberg" the iceberg "adorns itself" and creates "jewelry". The iceberg is made synonymous to the soul, which is "fair" (*Poems*, 2011, p. 17). Being a "fair" sex and adorning oneself are a woman's characteristics. In her poem "The Riverman" the river spirit is a female being called *Luandinha*. She wears an "elegant white satin" dress and has "big green eyes". She is also called the "virgin mirror" and her abode under water is considered a home with a "room" that "shines like silver" (*Poems*, 2011, p. 122). In the "Songs for a Colored Singer", the ships sink in the "breast" of the sea while it gives "lullaby to adult and child" (*Poems*, 2011, p. 63).

Bishop's water images represent Kristeva's new generation of women, who will be conscious of their fluidity and who will harmonize their biological character, as mothers, (including the roles of guardians and careers), with their individual creativity in culture formation. Rather than the debate for equality, Kristeva believes that women, in future times, will harmonize their mind and body by

making most of their fluid boundaries.

### ***Kristeva and Bishop in perspective***

According to the psychoanalyst Kristeva, the semiotic is the “distinctive mark, trace, index, precursory sign, proof, engraved or written sign, imprint, trace or figuration” (Kristeva, 1984, p. 26). In this sense, it is the extra-verbal articulation – bodily drives, emotions, sounds, rhythms produced in the 'maternal' space (Kristeva, 1984, p. 26) called *chora*. The *chora* is “an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation formed at the crossroads of language and biology through the playful transfer between bodies: the infant's confused mass of body parts and the mother's always already socialized body” (Kristeva, 1984, p. 25).

The semiotic *chora* celebrates the unification of the mother and the child; their identities have been merged as they are affected by each other's presence. The child imitates and articulates the drives and sounds produced by the mother's body. Therefore, the semiotic *chora* becomes a “rhythmic space . . . the process by which significance is constituted”

(Kristeva, 1984, p. 26). As a linguistic phenomenon, the semiotic expresses the plurality of existence of the speaking being , mother/child, in the *chora* within the symbolic language.

This space where the child cannot distinguish from the mother and finds the mother's body as her own, Bishop calls it a “dazzling dialectic” in her poem “Santarem” (*Poems*, 2011, p. 226). It is a heterogeneous place where cultural differences exist no more. There is no fine a demarcation of boundaries nor identities. One is merged with the other, giving birth to a plural self:

. . . *To literary  
interpretations  
Such as: life/death,  
r i g h t / w r o n g ,  
male/female  
--such notions  
would have resolved,  
dissolved, straight off  
In that watery,  
dazzling dialectic.  
(Poems, 2011, p. 226)*

The semiotic *chora* harmonizes the identities of the mother and the child. They both are influenced by each other's existence in the sphere, and therefore have a dual identity. In the

chapter, "The Dichotomy and Heteronomy of Drives" from *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva mentions that all cultural distinctions such as male/female, process of "life/death", the morality that teaches us "right/wrong" do not exist here (Kristeva, 1984, p. 167). The mother takes on the role of male and female, when her body nourishes the child as a mother, and when she exposes the child to the cultural language of men by making the child imitate drives and sounds produced by her. The mother's body can generate both life and death. There are no oppositions such as "right/wrong" here, as the mother and child are not rivaling. By imitating her mother's drives, the child assumes the law of her mother as her own.

In the *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva identifies the coming together of biological and cultural differences in language through the interplay of the semiotic (maternal realm) and the symbolic (paternal realm). The two spheres are engaged in an ongoing dialectic within the signifying process, and are complementing each other. The space where this act of harmonizing

dichotomies takes place is the text. Within the text, the symbolic enables the semiotic to express itself and the semiotic shatters the rigidity of symbolic meanings and makes it diverse. Although both are distinct, the mother and the child, yet in language they exist together and affect each other, to enrich it in meaning and purpose. One cannot exist without the other.

Kristeva insists that her differentiation between the semiotic and symbolic is not meant to advocate feminism. In the article, "Julia Kristeva on Femininity: The Limits of a Semiotic Politics", Kristeva's rejection of the feminist politics surprises other critics (Jones, 1984, p. 56). In fact, her writings do not talk of the traditional feminist thinking. She does not blame patriarchy for women's marginalization and inequality of rights; she speaks of a new and rebranded feminism, which takes women as speaking beings capable of multiple identities (Jones, 1984, p. 56).

### Discussion

Women, as speaking beings, have plurality of meanings and varied social, cultural, and political roles to



perform. Therefore, Bishop commemorates this plurality by introducing us to “The Map” in a manner new to us. Set in ““seashore towns” and coastal waters of Nova Scotia” (Haft, 2012, p. 4), Bishop inculcates actual locational allusions stretching back to her earlier years. Haft also notes the juxtaposition between “the conflicting realities of map image and actual geography even as she transforms both by repeated changes of perspective” (Haft, 2012, p. 4). While bearing imaginative and real geographies, Bishop shows her interest in the plurality of spaces; as a traveler she questions the relationship between the land and sea and forms a fluid connection between them.

In “Bishop's Influence on Stevens?”, Thomas Travisano observes that the “speaker animates and personifies the map's geometry and puts the normally fixed spatial configurations on the map into dynamic interaction” (1995, p. 48). Thus, further crystallizing the fluid relation of the earth and water. The land and sea become real, as well as strange, when they show a dialogic relationship between the symbolic language and the semiotic *chora*.

Beginning the poem with her assertion that land lies in water, Bishop establishes the significance of water in lending support to the land. The sea is that invisible realm of the mother, whose contribution has been ignored. Bishop expands her understanding of water as the basis of land; therefore, land attains its identity from water. The water makes the boundary of the land fuzzy. In doing so, it disturbs the boundaries of the poem by keeping its meanings unfixed. Bishop wrote to Gerald Manly Hopkins, in a letter in 1934, confessing that a poem for her is not a “sudden fixed apparition” but a “moving, changing idea or series of ideas” (Poems, Prose, and Letters, 2008, p. 665). In “The Map”, water acts as the semiotic *chora* that celebrates the mother's space, which is always in movement and makes the speaking subject plural. The semiotic *chora* seeps this plurality of meanings into the symbolic language of the land and disengages its conventional interpretations. The semiotic *chora* gives meaning to the symbolic world by giving the child before birth the orientation to the language and culture. The mother enables the child to have the subject/object distinction and attain

multiplicity of identities in the outside world.

*. . . Land lies in  
water; it is  
shadowed green.  
. . . Or does the  
land lean down to  
lift the sea from  
under,  
. . . Along the fine  
tan sandy shelf  
Is the land tugging  
at the sea from  
under? (Poems,  
2011, p. 16)*

Bishop's act of questioning herself about the workings of land and sea, the sea leaning down to "lift" or "tug" (Poems, 2011, p. 16) from beneath, reveals the position of the semiotic beneath the surface of the symbolic. The symbolic is constantly digging up meaning from the semiotic realm to make language effective. No matter how much the contribution of woman is ignored, the reality lies bare within language that it is the creativity of woman, as a mother, as a speaking being, and the cadence of her emotions that brings liveliness and motion within the symbolic world.

Bishop gives due importance to

mothers by reverting to her own through the water images. Water reminds Bishop of her fishing village, Nova Scotia, where she had her memories of her mother suffering from schizophrenia (Haft, 2012, p. 4). Her displacement, as she went to New England, has given her a sense of loss of identity, which she tries to trace by going back to the watery realm of the mother - the very source of her womanhood.

*T h e s e  
peninsulas take the  
water between  
thumb and finger  
like women  
feeling for the  
smoothness of  
yard-goods.  
... M a p p e d  
waters are more  
quiet than the land  
is,  
Lending the  
land their waves'  
own confrontation.  
. . (Poems, 2011,  
p. 16)*

There is the sense of touch involved when the spaces meet. She makes it similar to the "smoothness"

(*Poems*, 2011, p. 16) that the women feel for the “yard-goods” (*Poems*, 2011, p. 16). Moreover, the wave's rise and fall represent the rhythm and movement within the semiotic *chora*. The mother and child create music through their bodily drives and emotions, and disrupt the quiet land of language. This confrontation of the waves with the land disturbs the boundaries of paternal language, making its rigid boundaries weak and penetrable. The water and land, as semiotic and symbolic realms, are at once opposites. They set up their own boundaries, but mingle with each other as well.

In “The Map” (*Poems*, 2011, p. 16) Bishop creates a landscape foreign to the objects depicted. The land and water harmonizing and yet remaining distinct highlight Kristeva's semiotic/symbolic, mind/body, nature/culture dichotomy working together in speaking beings. Women are not only objects of physical appeal, but they have creative minds to contribute to the culture too.

In her book chapter, “A Window into Europe”, Linda Anderson posits that for Bishop “reality goes with

one” (*Lines of Connection*, 2013, p. 44); the reality of the subject's identity is changing all the time like the movements of the sea, it waves rising and falling, flowing back and forth, towards land and away from it. Like the mother/child relationship, the changing reality of the land and sea affects the fixity of meanings of the symbolic language; the waves of the sea constantly affect the boundaries of the land.

In “The Imaginary Iceberg” (*Poems*, 2011, p. 17), Bishop defines the creativity of Kristeva's semiotic *chora*, the imaginary realm, through the iceberg. Jonathan Ellis states in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, that the iceberg stands as Bishop's “accumulated childhood feelings” (Ellis, 2003, p. 462). Hence, the iceberg shows the workings of the mother's body, her relationship with the child, and how it helps in the development of the child during childhood. Kristeva describes the semiotic *chora* to be a space “formed at the crossroads of language and biology through the playful transfer between two bodies” (Kristeva, 1984, p. 25). So here the iceberg's act of breaking down and creating new shapes of snow can be

seen as the mother's nourishment of the child in her body - a biological responsibility that she fulfills. Furthermore, the mother's bodily environment and drives for the child are an orientation of the symbolic language and culture.

The poem begins with an assertion that "We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship" (*Poems*, 2011, p. 17). The iceberg can be taken as the semiotic *chora* and the ship as the symbolic identification for a transport over water. The iceberg is preferred here not to build a hierarchy of sexes, but to acknowledge the function of the mother's body. This time, Bishop has taken the iceberg, a static, frozen form of water, instead of the sea, to show the working of the semiotic *chora*, and to revisit the position of women in the world. The iceberg displays hardness and physical stasis that hinders the flow of water and ships sailing on it. But the ship does sail on the seemingly static water body. Bishop seems to say that women are not static beings; in their stasis they are capable of thought and action, and therefore can bring about change through their creativity in the outside world as well.

Bishop clearly states that this iceberg is a "moving marble", outwardly quiet and still, but inwardly it is a "breathing plain of snow" that "rises and sinks" (*Poems*, 2011, p. 17). It has been given human qualities that breathe action. Its boundaries are permeable, and its fluidity takes on various shapes and sizes. The iceberg shows varied emotions when it rises above water and makes its presence felt, or when it sinks in its depths and surprises the sailors. As an iceberg, the seemingly static semiotic *chora* can make itself known to the symbolic world through its constructive actions.

If the iceberg is the mother's body, then the snow floating inside can be taken as the child, a part of the mother's body, similar to the amniotic fluid. The child, like the snow inside, is protected and nourished by the iceberg. The mother and the child are part of the same mass of water, but distinct as well, just like the iceberg and the snow.

*This iceberg cuts  
its facets from  
within.  
Like jewelry from a  
grave  
It saves itself  
perpetually and*



adorns  
Only itself. . .  
(*Poems*, 2011, p.  
17)

The iceberg cherishes the unity of the mother/child bond. The mother/child share a relationship, which is ecstatic. The mother showers her love and affection on the child within her, just as the iceberg hones its manifestations. The pieces of ice cut off from a big iceberg are the iceberg's extensions. The mother values her child as her integral part, and as her own creation, which the iceberg takes for a jewel dug from the depths of a grave. The "grave" (*Poems*, 2011, p. 17) is taken as a place of the dead, but here it can be taken in terms of the space of the semiotic *chora*, which is deep inside and appears to be quiet. The stress laid on the iceberg's appreciation and care for "only itself" reminds of the narcissistic (woman) who is in love with herself i.e., the child that she carries as part of herself. According to Kristeva, when women love themselves, they do indeed love their children. Therefore, the pond in "Chemin de Fer" echoes that "Love should be put into action" (*Poems*, 2011, p. 22).

In *New Maladies of the Soul*, Kristeva describes the maternal body and her experience of pregnancy as:

... a dramatic ordeal: a splitting of the body, the division and coexistence of self and other, of nature and awareness, of physiology and speech. . . . The arrival of the child, on the other hand, guides the mother through a labyrinth of a rare experience: the love for another person, as opposed to love for herself...for another person with which the 'I' becomes merged (through amorous or sexual passion). . . . In this way, maternity becomes a true creative act, some-thing that we have not yet been able to imagine. (1995, p. 219)

The creative process of the mother's body involves the child - the subject for whom the mother becomes an object. The mother's body is a unification and division of two beings. Therefore, the identity of a woman as mother and daughter is never singular but plural; the other is always intruding onto the watery boundaries of the self. This fragile boundary between self and other is always making and breaking identities. In this way, the iceberg in the process of giving shape to its creation

makes it distinct from itself. Similarly, the mother while nourishing the child and making her familiar with her drives, is actually leading the child to the distinction of herself from the mother. Kristeva calls the semiotic *chora* then, “no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated” (Kristeva, 1995, p. 219). This awareness leads the subjective child to form her own identities in the symbolic world; the child desires to be out of the influence of the mother. This influence in actual never goes away, but its threat enables the subject to diversify.

Bishop likens the iceberg to the soul: “Icebergs behove the soul/Both being self-made from elements least visible” (*Poems*, 2011, pp. 17-18). Such a poetic instance, which blurs the line between the human soul and iceberg is representative of “mind's attraction to, even need for, an idea of absolute autonomy, and a process of meditation by which this idea is approached and abandoned” (Costello, 1993, p. 92). The iceberg/semiotic *chora* is the space created by the mother; it is not visible to the outside world; it lies inside the body, or beneath the text. Only the mother can feel its presence. Bishop concludes the poem

by repeating the characteristics of the iceberg/semiotic *chora*: it is “fleshed”, full of life, “fair”, and transmits pure love to her own child; it is an “indivisible” place of oneness of mother and her child (*Poems*, 2011, p. 18).

This place of oneness is further deliberated in “The Man-Moth”. As a self-reflective poem, it represents the hidden aspects of the human soul. Bishop's desire to form the plurality of her selfhood is seen in the character of the Man-Moth, which is an amalgamation of a man and genderless entity. Furthermore, it is suggested that the poem “explores a nature defined by mixtures of the real and the fantastical, the rational and irrational, the human and animal, the urban and pastoral, the masculine and feminine” (Cleghorn & Jonathan Ellis, 2014, p. 72). Both, “The Map” and “The Man-Moth” bring together the diametric qualities of the imaginative and real, and allow them to seep into one another.

The Man-Moth is constituted of elements of real life and imagination. The subject has acquired this new identity because of the semiotic *chora* activated through the “tear” that the

Man-Moth possesses. Bishop uses the pronoun “He” for the creature to indicate his plurality of identity. Though from the pronoun he has the identity of a man, but not completely, as his “He” is shared by the other as well. The mother has her share in the identity formation of the subject, and she constructs a genderless identity of the moth to merge it with that of the male subject. In *The Faber Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, Helen Vendler recalls Bishop calling this combination as the “surrealism of everyday life” (1985, p. 4). She takes it to be an experience where certain objects arrest her attention and portray the realities of the unconscious for the poet. The Man-Moth shows Bishop's desire for unconventionality and attaining new interpretations for herself. This surrealism helps Bishop to make the workings of the maternal body more innovative: creating at once the natural and the remarkable.

In *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, Helen Vendler traces Bishop's brief time living in Paris in 1930s and becoming familiarized with surrealism in art and its focus on the subject and its unconscious realm. Vendler observes

that women writers in this period were attracted to this movement in art and literature to move away from the tradition of the “woman's voice”(1994, p. 1-17). Through surrealism, women wanted to acquire new voices and subject matter to touch upon. Similarly, surrealism has helped Bishop in showing the working together of the semiotic/symbolic in her poetic language. This surrealistic element in “The Man-Moth” helps breaking the boundaries of the mother/child relationship and merging them together.

In *Elizabeth Bishop: Poetics of Intimacy*, Victoria Harrison highlights Bishop's attribute to Darwin for influencing her keen observation in visualizing things both in dream and reality:

. . . reading Darwin, one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless heroic observations, almost unconscious or automatic – and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one feels that strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the

unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful perfectly useless concentration. (1993, p. 37)

This exhibition of the unconscious realm of the artist is seen through the Man-Moth undergoing a journey “through tunnels and dream recurrent dreams” (*Poems*, 2011, p. 29). The artist is going through self-exploration, entering the deep recesses of the unconscious, to find new identity for herself. And what she comes up with is a creature, which is neither completely a man nor a moth; neither completely real nor unreal. The Man-Moth is an amalgamation of dream and reality. The landscape seems natural in the beginning and depicts a metropolitan city in the moonlight. But then the moon becomes a disturbing presence for the Man-Moth and gives an eerie feeling about the whole scene. It is in this latter part of the poem that we come to know about the unreal characteristics of the Man-Moth possessing an unnatural “tear”:

*. . . Then form the  
lids  
One tear, his only  
possession, like the*

*bee's sting, slips.  
Slyly he palms it,  
and if you watch,  
he'll hand it over,  
Cool as from  
underground  
springs and pure  
enough to drink.  
(Poems, 2011, p. 29)*

The tear imagery is surrealistic. The tear is a natural thing but by connecting it with a bee's sting and with spring water gives it extraordinary qualities. The tear shows the attributes of massive fluidity through its relationship with spring water. Also, by making the tear similar to a bee's sting, the uniqueness of water and its capability for generating action is highlighted. The tear is the creative force behind the existence of the Man-Moth. The act of slipping the tear is Man-Moth's acknowledgement of the contribution of the maternal body in its identity formation. The tear when separated for a while, makes the subject/object distinction. Thus, giving the subject a plural identity of the Man-Moth – male and genderless. In *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics* the man-moth also “evinces” “the finest-spiritual over-sensibility”



(Lombardi, 1995, p. 114). Sensibility is intrinsic to maternal nature. Hence, the tear in this dichotomy is the pure selfless world of the mother, where she nourishes the subject - Man-Moth - and contributes to its social identity. The connection between the subject and the mother's body can never be severed, like the tear which though slips from the eye, separates from the subject for a while, but can be absorbed by the Man-Moth again. It shows that the *chora* is always present within the subject. The subject has absorbed this space within itself for all times to come, in order to carry on the process of subjectivity. In "Songs of a Colored Singer" (*Poems*, 2011, pp. 63-67) the "heavy dew of tears" that has been hanging "for years and years" is capable of producing seeds that grow into human "faces" (*Poems*, 2011, p. 66). This reinforces the creative abilities of water that Man-Moth's "tear" advocates. Water in the form of dew or tears acts out the semiotic *chora* - the germination ground that enables the speaking beings to develop.

### Conclusions

The variety of water images in Bishop's poetry show the working of

the semiotic *chora*. They exhibit her desire to know and form new contours of bodies. Therefore, Robert Lowell describes Bishop's poetry to be more in motion than at rest: there "is something in motion, weary but always persisting, almost always failing and on the point of disintegrating" (Ellis, 1985, p. 458).

The semiotic *chora* exhibits movement and flexibility in Bishop's poetry. The subject is consistently in motion to constitute her subjective "I". This "I" is constructed and reconstructed with the hope of making it strictly the self. But this can never happen, as Bishop asserts the fact that identity is always plural, and even multiple.

In addition, the water images in Bishop's selected poems are tantamount to dismantling binaries, one of which is maternal/paternal, as well as mother/child, where the mother takes upon the human and single embodiment of both parents. Bishop's water images are deployed to carve out identities for the perturbed poet in moments of wilderment, aiding her to meander back to her mother, the origin of herself, and her identity. In this way, the semiotic destabilizes the normative

and monolithic image of Bishop, as a woman, by instilling it with fluidity and porousness aligning with Kristeva's notions. In contemporary times, Bishop's poetry makes us think of our social and cultural barriers, it allows us to revisit our boundaries and relocate ourselves as speaking beings, and not just women, in any society.

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