

Elizabeth Bishop: Abjecting the Other and Estranging the Self

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Abstract: *This research sheds light on Elizabeth Bishop's demonstration of Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic concept of "Abjection" and "Estrangement" within the "maternal" space called semiotic chora. This maternal space exhibits abjection and estrangement within the fluid images in the poetic collections – Questions of Travel and Geography III. The mother-child bond celebrated in Bishop's earlier collections culminates into the process of separation of the child from the mother, and subject from the object. Bishop's separation from her mother forms new meanings for herself, which resist the identity of the mother, who is no more part of the subject, but an entity outside. Bishop has confronted her mother's existence on the border of her identity. Yet the struggle to reject the mother's body, in order to create an "I" becomes an ongoing process, which makes Bishop, as the subject, estranged to her own self. The ambivalent relationship with the mother, being outside the subject, speeds up the process of identity formation of the poet as subject. This, consequently, makes the subject confront her strangeness, owing to the multiplicity of meanings.*

Keywords: *Semiotic chora., abjection, estrangement, subject, object*

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Introduction

“Even the soundest among us know just the same that a firm identity remains a fiction”(McAfee, 2004 p.57).

This article furthers the discussion on Elizabeth Bishop's fluid poetry in the article “Elizabeth Bishop and the Watery Discourse: The *Semiotic Chora* at play” (Cheema, 2021). As established in this article, Elizabeth Bishop's poetry is replete with water

images, which celebrate the “maternal” space (Kristeva, 1984, p.26) of Julia Kristeva's *semiotic chora*. The linguist and psychoanalyst, Kristeva describes the *semiotic chora* as a “maternal” space of fluidity, where the mother/child, subject/object bond exhibits certain bodily derives, emotions, a certain rhythm, movement, and where the child asserts plurality of identity, as being one with the mother, and distinct as well. These drives are represented in the

semiotic, the linguistic space of signs within language. Kristeva's psychoanalytic concepts of "Abjection" and "Estrangement" are experienced within the *semiotic chora*. Therefore, this article delves deeper into the space of the *semiotic chora* to see the workings of "Abjection" and "Estrangement" within the mother/child bond exhibited in the fluid imagery in Bishop's poetry. This research argues that Bishop's poetic collections - *Questions of Travel* and *Geography III* constantly evade the influence of the mother, the "other", to construct Bishop's identities beyond being a woman - plural and ever becoming.

Bishop's third collection, *Questions of Travel* develops the concept of abjection, which surfaces as a result of love/hate relationship with the mother within the *semiotic chora*. This leads to the substitution of mother love and the development of subjectivity. By expelling the mother, the subject looks for her substitutes, friendships with another woman, man, genderless object, which gives new

identities to the subject. In *Questions of Travel*, the water images such as waterfalls, rain, tears show greater force, and make an effort to overcome barriers i.e., borders of self. Bishop's plural identity comes to the fore, as she dedicates this collection to her beloved friend Lota de Macedo Soares, and makes her presence felt through various other identities.

By the end of her journey towards subjectivity, in *Geography III*, Bishop realizes the strangeness of her singularity. She tries to construct a singularity, which will be her very own. But, the subjective "I" she constructs is plural. The "I" is always merging the self with the other. Thus, there is always strangeness within the identity of the subject, which makes the subject a stranger to her own self. The last collection, *Geography III* shows that the semiotic realm will always remain in the psyche of the speaking being, and therefore, she will continue abjecting the mother to maintain an identity estranged to her self, and incomplete. In tandem with Kristeva's belief that "writing is

impossible without some kind of exile” (Smith, 1996, p.5), the poems in *Geography III*, register this exile in the strange nature of the speaking subject. This idea gains strength with the subject’s sense of guilt on severing bond with the mother, and the realization of mother’s existence as inevitable in the life of the subject.

The subject becomes an exile as she has no place of her own. The mother’s place, she celebrated earlier, has been faded by her fear of losing her singular identity. Although she realizes that singularity is just an imagination; the subject is essentially plural. Bishop acknowledged herself as a voyager, who never felt at home. This thought agrees with Kristeva’s belief that exile is essential for attaining subjectivity.

The socio-cultural times have also contributed to Bishop’s abjection of the mother and her ongoing search for new meanings. From late fifties to sixties feminist movements raised issues of subjectivity in art. Pop art dealt with issues of gender roles and false identities of women, all contrived for publicity in ads, magazines and

electronic media. Women became a commodity for men in the society, having no identity of their own.

During her stay in Brazil from early fifties to late sixties, Bishop noticed this gender discrimination in women artists. During her long stay with her friend Lota, from early fifties till Lota’s death, Bishop questions boundaries of identities beyond the body of the mother.

While writing for *Questions of Travel*, Bishop made a comparison between herself and her friend Robert Lowell, as poets received in Brazil: “They think if I were any good I’d be at home. Lowell is coming officially and is a MAN. Lady poets in Brazil are male poet’s mistresses” (Kalstone, 1989, p. 200). Considering the times, Bishop disliked being “classed as a woman poet” (Ellis, 1985, p.463), and wanted to attain identities other than being a woman only.

Bishop and Kristeva; Abjection and Estrangement

Kristeva celebrates the fluid space of *chora*, as the psychic space, where the child has orientation to her plurality and

to the socio-cultural world through her mother's body. Considering this plural relationship of the subject and the object, Kristeva is of the view that "linguistic changes constitute changes in the status of the subject – his relation to the body, to others, and to objects" (Kristeva, 1984, p. 15). If language constructs the process of subjectivity, then in case of Bishop, her water images in her poetic language establish a relationship of love and hate with her mother. This relationship with the mother becomes Bishop's relation to her own body and to others.

In the *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva describes subjectivity as a "fragile spot",

where our collapsed defenses reveal, beneath the appearances of a fortified castle, a flayed skin, neither inside nor outside, the wounding exterior turning in to an abominable interior, war bordering on putrescence, while social and family rigidity, that beautiful mask, crumbles within the beloved abomination of

innocent vice. A universe of borders, seesaws, fragile and mingled identities, wanderings of the subject and its objects, fears and struggles, abjections and lyricisms. At the turning point between social and asocial, familial and delinquent, feminine and masculine, fondness and murder (Kristeva, 1982, p. 135).

The image of the "flayed skin, neither inside nor outside" recalls the birth scene, where the child coming out of the *chora*, seems an extension of the mother's body as well as a separate being from the mother's body. The child coming out of the mother's body reminds of the expulsion of the object from the subject's body. This moment of childbirth shows the borders of the self so fluid. One is unable to decipher whether there are two bodies being separated, or one that is acquiring new contours. This explains abjection just so well. It is abjection, which makes the subjective borders so fragile, porous and flexible that the subject is bound to be influenced by the presence of the object

mother at her boundaries.

According to Kristeva, the process of abjection is an “immoral, sinister” act of the subject negating the “most archaic” and “most fragile” (Kristeva, 1982, pp.4,12) object, the mother. This is why, Kristeva names it “Maternal Abjection” (McAfee, 2004, p.49). She further defines the relation between the subject and abject as: “The one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject who places himself, separates himself, situates himself and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing” (Kristeva, 1982, p.8). This pertains to the subject’s ambivalent feelings for her mother. The union and plurality that was celebrated in the *chora* exists no more as the subject has come to know about the mother being another person, having a separate identity. The subject both loves and hates her mother, as the semiotic *chora* becomes no more than a place both generated and negated. The subject loves her mother because of their primal bond, but hates her for influencing her identity, and never enabling her to be an individual person.

According to Kristeva, abjection takes places when: “... ‘I’ expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself” (Kristeva, 1989, p.6). The mother is always on the borders of the subject. The child loves her own self, which is the mother’s body, till the subject/object distinction has not taken place. But, the moment she becomes conscious of the mother at the borders of her self, she rejects her. The subject then believes that ...my concern lies with the other, what is heterogeneous, ...this heterogeneous object is of course a body that invites me to identify with it and immediately forbids any identification; it is not me, it is a non me in me, besides me, outside me, where the me becomes lost (Kristeva, 1984, p. 163).

By negating part of self, the individual is creating borders for oneself. In order to form identity, the subject finds it necessary to do away with the mother. But her relationship with the mother is ambivalent. She desires for that unification experienced in the semiotic *chora*, but she also hates

the mother because she affects her subjectivity. The mother on the borders influences the “I”, making the identity of the subject plural. Moreover, the “I” does not remain singular in meaning. “If abomination is the lining of my symbolic being, ‘I’ am therefore heterogeneous, pure and impure, and as such always potentially condemnable” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 135). The subject keeps shunning off the abject; but, since her borders are fluid, the abject seeps into the subject, and remains on the periphery. The borders always intrude the self.

The realization of the mother as an object distinct from self within the semiotic *chora*, enables the subject to abject the mother and form boundaries of own self. The subject then is “heterogeneous to meaning.” The subject becomes a diversified being; she is a subject-in-process, always forming reforming identities.

Since the abjection disturbs identity of the subject, Bishop is estranged to herself. This is because she constantly destroys the maternal space

and creates new spatial identities. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva defines estrangement to be an “unappeased hunger”. The subject feels like an “orphan” whose only purpose is to disrupt spaces to find her own (Smith, 1996, p. 39). Kristeva considers estrangement to be the outcome of the subject’s separation from the mother’s body. Though this separation, like abjection, is never complete. Kristeva, precisely, describes this feeling:

. . . a stranger inhabits us: it is the hidden face of our identity, the space that ruins our resting place, the moment where understanding and instinctive fellow feeling become swallowed up. One is a foreigner in another country because one is already a foreigner within. But we cannot get rid of the stranger that is bound to be with us. The subject is a stranger, an exile who never settles. He is restless, exiled from origins (Smith, 1996, p.20).

The mother is the strange and familiar being within the subject’s body.

When the subject abjects the mother, she makes the mother unfamiliar by negating her space and existence. But this will always remain a dream, as the mother will always be there with the subject.

Being a traveler all her life, Bishop has remained unsettled in her temporary abodes and identities. As the subject, she experienced exile both inside and outside, having no mother, and therefore no indigenous land. But the reality is that the abject mother is never separate from the child. This is why, the child is always haunted by the presence of a foreigner within. Since the mother affects the identity of the subject, therefore the subject becomes a foreigner to herself. The “I” becomes an amalgamation of self and foreign.

Discussion

The poems in the *Questions of Travel* see “geography as history, description as autobiography” (Kalstone, 1989, p. 220). These poems separate Bishop, as the subject from her home, which is marked by the presence of the mother. The subject now explores new spaces through traveling to places.

She has come to stay in Brazil, while writing for this collection. She is now set to move beyond the boundaries marked by her mother, to separate from the mother’s influence, and to find new identities for herself. Travel shows the spirit to acquire new meanings and identities for herself. The collection exhibits unacknowledged identities, such as, the burglar, cranky man, gardener, a witch called the Riverman, King Arthur, a dolphin etc. There is an element of rebellion in all these identities, they all behave unlike they are expected to. The burglar rebels against the morality of the society; the cranky man is an outcome of this modern chaotic world, and the dolphin who acts out, both as, an amphibian and a man etc.

This pluralism makes way throughout the collection in the description of unusual women, being physically powerful like men, and undertaking unconventional tasks in the poems. In “Arrival at Santos” there is “Miss Breen” who is a “six feet tall” and “retired police lieutenant”. In “Brazil, January 1, 1502” the female lizard is

wicked in characteristics, and coquettish birds are “maddening little women” enticing men. In “The Riverman” there is a river spirit “Luandinha”, who smokes “cigar” and attracts a man towards her. In “The Burglar of Babylon” there is this strong “auntie” whom the burglar loves very much. She gives refuge to the Burglar. In “Sestina” there is this impressive “grandmother” who reads stories to a child and hides her emotions from her. And in “First Death in Nova Scotia” Bishop merges gender identities by making equating the boy Arthur with a “doll”.

All the characteristics attained by women here, and even the identity of Arthur, who is a blend of man and woman represent, Lota de Macedo Soares. This argument can be supported through Robert Lowell’s wife, Elizabeth Hardwick’s description of Lota in comparison to Bishop: “Lota would drive a car with great zest and speed and Elizabeth couldn’t or didn’t drive. Lota was helpless in the Kitchen and about the household, which Elizabeth indeed was not. . .” (Kalstone, 1989, p. 151).

A close reading of the poem “Questions of Travel” shows the process of abjection through the forceful image of waterfalls. The imagery shows great movement, which is to become the driving force behind the subject’s journey towards plurality. Considering the characteristics of water imagery here, the waterfalls can be taken here as the subject, whereas the sea is the semiotic *chora*, which is the object, the mother’s abode. The waterfalls seem to undergo a journey of attaining identity of their own, for which they have to do away with the influence of the sea, which attracts them towards it, and merges their identity with its own:

There are too many waterfalls
here; the crowded streams

hurry too rapidly down to the
sea,

-- For if those streaks, those
mile-long, shiny, tearstains,

Aren’t waterfalls yet,

In a quick age or so, as ages go
here,

They probably will be (*Poems*,
2008, p. 74).

The scene where the so-called waterfalls are falling quickly into the sea shows the semiotic *chora* at play. The *chora* as “. . . is not merely a structure but a structure open to its surroundings and other structures; interactions occur in this opening that are of the order of procreation and rejection, and that permit a living being to live, to grow, to renew itself” (McAfee, 2004, p. 41). So, the waterfalls are communicating with the expansive sea to negotiate on its influence on them, so that they can attain their own identity. Till the time the so-called waterfalls remain in contact with the sea – within the mother’s space, they will not completely become waterfalls; they will remain a mass of “streams”, of “tearstains”.

With the realization of the so-called waterfalls that they are never separate beings, they reject what is other to them to form the borders of “I”. In order to have a complete identity of their own, the waterfalls rebel against the sea with the view that they will become an individual self at some point in time. The so-called waterfalls have elements of the sea in them; they are

made up of “streams” and “tearstains”, of which the sea constitutes. Thus, such merging of distinct identities shows that the mother’s body, the sea is “a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently, a division of language – and it has always been so” (Kristeva, 1987, p. 254). The waterfall is a part of the sea, just like the subject is part of the mother’s body. This connection between the two identities can never be segregated, as their boundaries are not fixed but fluid, like that of the waterfalls and the sea. The sea and waterfalls are one, constituting a larger body of water, yet they remain distinct within their environment. They affect each other’s identity, and this is why they remain plural.

The waterfalls desire to be separate and achieve this state by shaking the abject sea’s “essentially divisible, foldable, catastrophic” nature; the subject as “deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines – for they are constituted of the abject – constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a stray”

(Kristeva, 1982, p. 8). In the process of becoming a single self, different from the mother, the subject loses herself in the plethora of identities. Never satisfied with one, the subject remains on the move to evolve more identities.

In the “Squatter’s Children” another forceful image of water, “rain” represents the *chora* by being a “room of falling rain”. The “rain” here becomes the confrontation of nature, the mother, which never leaves the subject. The poem talks of children playing in the open space, when rain starts falling, and its noise conjoins with the noise of the mother’s voice, calling the kids back home:

...apparently the rain’s reply
consists of echolalia,
and Mother’s voice, ugly as sin,
Keeps calling to them to come in.

(*Poems*, 2008, p. 76)

The mother’s call like that of the rain is inevitable and beyond the control of the kids. The fact that the kids have to listen to the mother’s call, though they don’t like it can be seen as:

the subject discovers itself as the
impossible separation/identity of

the maternal body. It hates that body but only because it can’t be free of it. The mother’s voice reminds the subject of the guilt of separating from the mother’s body, that body, the body without border, the body out of which this abject subject came, is possible (McAfee, 2004, p. 48).

In “Manuelzinho”, rain is unwanted as it is a source of destruction for a garden rather than activating its growth: “. . . it rains for a solid week / and the whole thing’s ruined again.” In the “Burglar of Babylon”, rain is unpleasant and destructive; there is an indication of war in the rain. There are references to “gun barrels” and “helmets” shining in the rain. In “Songs of the Rainy Season”, Bishop regards her phase of life as “the dim age of water.” This shows the subject’s parting from the watery realm of the mother. The subject aims at overcoming the influence of the mother in her life to explore new horizons of identities for herself. “The Riverman” gives

supernatural qualities to the domain of the mother within the river. The water spirit of the river sends a human dolphin to entice a man to enter the river. The river becomes both a destructive and seductive mother, attracting the man to choose the underwater life like that of the dolphin. The man as subject gives in to the river for love of the water spirit and enters its recesses. "The abject signals the precarious grasp the subject has over its identity and bodily boundaries, the ever-present possibility of sliding back into the corporeal abyss from which it was formed" (Stacey, 1993, p. 74). Since the speaking subject is a fluid being, flexible and susceptible to changing identities, then Kristeva is apt in calling it an "amphibian" (Kristeva, 1995, p.7). Here the man becomes an amphibian, a dolphin by embracing the watery space of the mother again. This poem shows the ambivalent feelings of the subject; his reclining towards the object indicates his fluid boundaries, as that of the mother's. So, there is always the possibility of one trespassing over the limits of the other.

I went down the river
I heard the Dolphin sigh
As he slid into the water.
I waded into the river.
(*Poems*, 2008, p.85)

The man is drawn to the river out of sheer love and curiosity for the water spirit, and experiences that ". . .the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me into place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva, 1982, p.2). The Riverman's immersion into the sea disrupts his prior identity and gives him a new one.

The dolphin, which is part of the sea, partially carries the mother's identity. In this way, the encounter between the sea and the man gives birth to the plural "I" of the subject. The mother becomes an abject, which is both "yearned and condemned" (Smith, 1996, p. 150). The subject is bound to have contact with the mother. Even if she is abjected, she exists on the boundaries of the subject. The mother/child is always on the periphery of each other's existence. The mother is instrumental in the process of subjectivity of the child.

The Riverman in the poem

acknowledges the importance of the river in life by saying that “everything we need / can be obtained from the river”. The subject shows love/hate relationship with the mother. At times attracted towards her space and crossing boundaries, and at others, trying to do away with the mother’s influence on its subjectivity.

In “Sestina”, the vision of the abject as a “sign of an impossible object, a boundary and a limit” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 154) is established through the tear imagery. These tears show their inevitability in the life of the subject.

In the poem, the child observes tears as part of every activity within the environment. The tears fall like the “September rain” on top of the roof of the house, the child’s grandmother while reading jokes, laughs to “hide her tears”, the tea kettle is creating “small hard tears”, and tea is full of “dark brown tears” etc. All these manifestations of the tears show the plurality of the maternal body. The mother can attain so many contours and identities consequently. She always makes her

presence felt around the subject. The abject is never gone for good, but is always in connection with the subject, like the tears. The tears show personal grief and evoke memories of the subject. They also urge the subject to express herself, and therefore, explore new identities. The child shows her association with the tears by making a drawing of a man with buttons of tears. The man can be another identity of the subjective child, whose mother, like the tears provokes the child to generate new meanings through art.

The child learns that it is “time to plant tears”. The line reminds of Herbert’s poem “The Flower”, where emphasis is on watering the flowers. The overpowering presence of the tears/mother influences the boundaries of the child. The tears enable the child to attain plurality by allowing them to flourish in her own boundaries.

The collection, *Questions of Travel* questions the inevitability of the abject in the life of the subject, and concludes that the mother’s interference is necessary in the construction of

subjectivity. It is the ambivalent relationship with the mother that enables the subject to be in process, and never remain satisfied with one identity. The subject disrupts any identity for fear of being identical to that of the mother. Although, due to the presence of this outsider, the mother, the subject is always plural and never singular in identity. Its borders are always shared by the mother, and they influence each other's fluidity. Hence, the psychic life of the subject keeps her alive, and constantly in motion, like water.

In *Geography III*, the poem "In the Waiting Room" shows the process of abjection leading to estrangement:

But I felt: you are an I,
You are an Elizabeth,
You are one of them.
Why should you be one, too?
(*Poems*, 2008, p.150)

Bishop reveals her perception about her identity as an "I", which should not have a speck of the mother's identity. The "I" also shows a neutral identity, without any reference to gender role. Kristeva says that the "quest for estrangement in one sense dissolves sexual identities"

(John Lechte & Maria Margaroni, 2004, p.106). Bishop's "I" exemplifies it here. Furthermore, the neutrality that Bishop desires here also reminds of the some of the feminist artists who in 70s went for gender-neutral names (*History of American Art*, 2007).

To take on a different self, Bishop abjects the mother and creates an "I" that would not have traces of her mother's identity. But when this "I" becomes Elizabeth, it indicates the specific gender identity. The name "Elizabeth" becomes a sign for woman, which is also linked to all the women in this world. This is why the subject can never be "one". She will always remain plural, related to the mother, as self and other. The poetic instance of "You are one of them" connects to all mother's and suggests the fact that subjectivity springs from the mother's space. This is further reinforced in "Crusoe in England" where Bishop reiterates that the subject can never be detached from the mother. The subject's "I" will always show the presence of the other on her borders: "The sun set in the sea; the same odd sun / Rose from the sea, /

And there was one of it and one of me”.

The sun can be taken as the speaking subject. The sun’s rising and setting in the sea is seen as natural. But there is a difference between the rising and the setting sun. The setting sun desires for plurality of identity, and therefore dives into the sea. The sun that rises out of the sea is one which has attained plural meanings. The identities of the sea and the sun merge, and therefore the rising sun becomes somewhat strange to the identity of the setting sun. Thus, the sun can confront its strangeness within. It becomes “the attacker and the victim, the same and the other, un-identical and foreign” (Kristeva, 1995, p. 223). The subject confronts the mother’s body and becomes the victim of her identity. The subject experiences the same and the other within herself. Thus, acknowledging the foreigner that squats inside her soul.

In “Night City” the city is swept by “burning tears”. In her excitement to achieve what constitutes herself she aggravates the destructive activity of the

tears by increasing their volume and transforming them to a lake. These tears reflect on the subject’s act of abjection. The subject here is showing her mixed feelings for the mother. The subject abjects the mother’s image of the tears. However, her love for the mother is evident from the “aquamarine”, “green and luminous” colour she assigns to the river. By saying that what is being burned is the ‘guilt’, Bishop reminds of the guilt of parting from mothers and not acknowledging their love for themselves.

Similarly, in “One Art” Bishop reconciliates with her strangeness. In this poem, she refers to two rivers, which remind of the river in “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore”. The rivers stand for Bishop and Moore’s mother/daughter relationship. Bishop says: “. . .I owned two rivers, a continent / I miss them, but it wasn’t a disaster”. The separation from the mother is seen as something natural here. That means estrangement to the other, which was once a part of self is natural, and will always affect the

subject, but never put an end to her journey of subjectivity.

Conclusion

Kristeva's concepts of "Abjection" and the realization of "Estrangement" within the self have contributed to the process of subjectivity in Bishop's poetry. This also leads to the realization that the process of subjectivity is on-going for a lifetime. Bishop, as the subject, thus practices conflicts within herself, and yet tries to maintain a harmonious balance. As the subject, Bishop is a "universe of borders", "mingled identities" just like the land and sea in "The Map". She celebrates abjection and makes her subjective self estranged to the other. As a woman, she is a fluid being. This fluidity will keep on flowing back to seek the influence of the other, and it will keep on flowing forward to exhibit that influence in Bishop's creativity in the outer world.

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