

SYNOPSIS

This dissertation theorizes the use of water imagery in the context of postmodern female American poetry on the pretext that poets like Elizabeth Bishop conceptualize womanhood through it.

In the 20th century American poetry water has been one of the recurrent images used by American male and female poets in their poetry. The research informs that in case of female poets such as Bishop, it has been a source of empowerment for them, making their subjectivity more diverse and fluid like water.

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) has made an effort to approach water in its various manifestations, from a drop to the expanse of the ocean: bringing in images of tears, lake, bay, river, strait, sea and ocean in a manner different than the modernists or her female contemporaries. Bishop has personified water in its varied forms, as both genderless and gendered to approach subjectivity. Her fluid imagery opens up the possibility that women can contribute to the making of a culture and its language, while tied to their domesticity and maternal roles as well. In many ways, she creates a psychoanalytic discourse through the use of water imagery. This plurality of identity sums up the concept of womanhood, which has been the core concern of the French psychoanalyst and linguist, Julia Kristeva's (1941-) theories of language.

The oft repeated images of water overpower Bishop's poems and show her love/hate relationship with her mother and the recognition of the mother's absence and her substitutions, which shatter the conventional woman's image in her poems and give her plurality of meanings. It is on this basis that Bishop comes closer to Julia Kristeva. Kristeva calls it a maternal discourse, where the fluid realm of mother's space called Chora is revisited time and again in life to acquire subjectivity through the mother/child bond. Linguistically Kristeva calls the articulations in this space as "Semiotics" — bodily signs, sounds, rhythm and gestures which are always at play in the "Symbolic" language. She is of the view that since women are speaking beings like men, so they share the domain of language and culture with their counterparts. Through this role in discourse formation women can attain new female identities — gendered and genderless - such as Bishop takes on in her poems: lesbian, Man-Moth, Robinson Crusoe, Gentleman of Shalott, fish, seal etc.

To analyze how Bishop incorporates Julia Kristeva's concept of womanhood in her water imagery, this thesis will pick on Bishop's four major collections from her collected work *The Complete Poems* (1927-1979): *North and South* (1946), *A Cold Spring* (1955), *Fluents of Travel* (1965) and *Geography III* (1976).

Thus the research will put across the idea that Bishop's water images integrate Kristeva's concept of womanhood, which speaks of the subjectivity of woman. This thesis will focus much on Kristeva's concept of Semiotic Chora. Along with that it will also bring in her concepts of "Melancholia", "Estrangement" and "Abjection". These concepts contribute to the plurality that Bishop strives for in her poems.