

# WATER IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF MICHÈLE ROBERTS'S IN-BETWEEN CHARACTERS

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## ABSTRACT

Water has been considered as a symbol of different and even contradictory issues: life, power, maternity, regeneration or purification, but also chaos, destruction and death. Similarly, it has also been connected with the feminine and the unconscious, topics which have been extensively dealt with by Michèle Roberts in her writings. Analogously, in many of Roberts's works, water appears as a key element in the construction of identity for her in-between characters. Even though Roberts has had no experience related to the postcolonial world, she has dealt with topics such as hybridity and otherness in her writings. In this paper, I will show how the element of water is closely linked with some of the most recurrent topics in Michèle Roberts's writings, especially in the construction of a true identity for those characters who, as Roberts's herself, belong to two different cultures and are therefore feel as foreign in both.

**KEYWORDS:** water, hybrid, unconscious, feminism, Michèle Roberts.

## RESUMEN

El agua ha sido considerada como símbolo de diferentes conceptos, en ocasiones incluso contradictorios: la vida, el poder, la regeneración o la purificación, así como del caos, la destrucción y la muerte. De igual forma, el elemento del agua se ha unido a lo femenino y al mundo del subconsciente, temas que han sido extensamente tratados por Michèle Roberts en sus obras. En gran parte de ellas, el agua aparece como elemento clave en la construcción de la identidad de sus personajes cuyas vidas se desarrollan entre dos culturas diferentes. A pesar de que Roberts no ha tenido ninguna relación con el mundo postcolonial, ha tratado, en algunas de sus obras, temas como la mezcla de culturas, el desplazamiento y la otredad. Este ensayo muestra cómo el elemento del agua cobra especial importancia y está estrechamente relacionado con los temas más tratados por Roberts, en especial en la construcción de la identidad de personajes que, como en el caso de la propia autora, pertenecen a dos culturas distintas y que se sienten extrañas en ambas.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** agua, híbrido, subconsciente, feminismo, Michèle Roberts.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since her first work was published, Michèle Roberts has been one of the most distinguished writers on the contemporary British literary scene. Both a poet and a fiction writer, her name is present in most of the studies and anthologies dealing with contemporary British literature, especially in those devoted only to women's writing. Since she began publishing, critics like Malcolm Bradbury (*The Modern British Novel*, 1993) or Lorna Sage (*The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing*, 1999) and more recently, Emma Parker (*Contemporary Women's Fiction*, 2004) or Nick Rennison (*Contemporary British Novelists*, 2005) have included Roberts as one of the most representative women writers of our age.

All her works in prose have been concerned, the same as her poetry, with feminist issues, and have explored human relationships, especially those between women, as friends, lovers, and as mothers and daughters and all the conflicts derived from them. Religion, especially Catholicism, where she was educated and which she rejected, is also a key component of all of Roberts's works, first as a critique of its misogynistic views and then taking it to fight against patriarchal discipline. She also included Catholicism in her writings in order to explore and rewrite the history of women characters who also fought against it and who rebelled, most of the times through writing, against the Catholic male oppression from the inside, like the figures of Mary Magdalene (*The Wild Girl*), Mrs. Noah (*The Book of Mrs. Noah*) or Teresa of Avila and other women saints (*Impossible Saints*).

Apart from feminism and religion, Roberts's novels come, according to her, from her unconscious: "every novel I've written has come from an image, usually an image in a dream, that's been so powerful that I'm haunted by it or obsessed with it, and have got to translate it into words" (Newman 123). Actually, the unconscious is something very powerful in her fiction too, with the presence of ghostly appearances, haunted places and characters or mediums included in her novels. Roberts has acknowledged her interest in psychoanalysis and Freudian and Jungian theories, as well as in French feminist theory and the influence of Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva or Luce Irigaray.

Michèle Roberts is the daughter of an English Protestant businessman and her mother a French Catholic teacher. This fact of being half-English, half-French has exerted a great influence both in her life and her writings to such an extent that, as she has acknowledged in an interview with Newman, "living in a double culture" was "the second impetus to my becoming a writer" (124). Roberts grew up in England, but spent the summers in her French grandparents' house in Normandy. Having two homes, speaking two languages and living in two different cultures, the English and the French, is present in most of her books, both in fiction and poetry. Because of this, in a very autobiographical manner, some of the characters in her novels are in-between, hyphenated subjects with a double nationality who live between two cultures.

Interestingly enough, in Michèle Roberts's writings, all these topics previously mentioned have, in one way or another, been connected with the same element: water. Likewise, this connection has also appeared in other studies connected with feminism and feminist writing, psychology, postcolonialism or literary studies. The aim of this paper is to discuss how water plays an essential role in the lives of Roberts's hyphenated subjects, especially in the construction of their real and true identity, and how all these topics with which Roberts



is concerned in her writings are linked by the presence of this element. To do it, I'm going to concentrate in the novels *Daughters of the House* and *Flesh and Blood*, where this link between water, the in-between, femininity and the unconscious is more clearly portrayed.

## 2. WATER AS A HEALING ELEMENT FOR THE IN-BETWEEN

Terms like in-between, the dichotomy of home and abroad, or concepts such as identity, displacement, otherness, and hybridity have usually been defined by postcolonial studies and have always been present in postcolonial literature. A great number of studies have tried to find a definition for these terms and have argued about their meaning and implications both in society and literature;<sup>1</sup> however, they have not been so much taken into account in other contexts different from postcolonial or migrant literature. Even though Michèle Roberts has not written any novel related to the postcolonial world, she has explored these so-called postcolonial terms beyond the postcolonial paradigm, albeit with no relation at all with the postcolonial experience.

In *Daughters of the House* (1992), Roberts deals with hybridity, with belonging to two different countries, England and France, and at the same time with being regarded as foreign in both. The protagonist, Léonie, also the daughter of a French mother and an English father, feels displaced in her two countries: she is considered English when she is in France and French when she is in England, and therefore not accepted and marginalised in her two places of origin. The fact that she cannot feel at home in either place, and having to live between two different cultures, languages and customs make the protagonist question her own identity, only finding her true self and her true language when she is in the middle of her journey between England and France, in the waters of the English Channel.

Regarding the change of countries and cultures, this is, in the case of Léonie, and in the case of Roberts herself, always preceded by a change of language in their travels. In the same way that Roberts describes this experience in her autobiography, Léonie felt how changing places and therefore cultures and languages, was something that happened in the middle of the Channel, when travelling from one country to the other. The passage describing this experience is probably the most interesting part of the book in this respect. Roberts has defined this account as “a description of translation as a metamorphosis occurring in the middle of the Channel, when languages, like monsters, change into each other far beneath the sea.” (*Paper 322*). It is, in fact, one of the most powerful images of the novel, and it is also essential to understand Léonie's feelings of hybridity and double identity:

For as they left England so they left the English language behind. Familiar words dissolved, into wind and salt spray, ploughed back into foam, the cold dark sea in whose

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<sup>1</sup> See Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, Elleke Boehmer's *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* or Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back*.



bottomless depths monsters swam, of no known nationality. Halfway across, as the Channel became *La Manche*, language reassembled itself, rose from the waves and became French. [...] Léonie fought to keep awake, to know the exact moment when, in the very centre of the Channel, precisely equidistant from both shores, the walls of water and of words met, embraced wetly and closely, became each other, composed of each other's sounds. For at that moment true language was restored to her. Independent of separated words, as whole as water, it bore her along as part of itself, a gold current that connected everything, a secret river running underground, the deep well, the source of life, a flood driving through her, salty breaker on her own beach, streams of words and non-words, voices calling out which were staccato, echoing, which promised bliss. (*Daughters* 35-36).

In the same way, we find another example of a double self in the story of George Mannot in what is perhaps Roberts's most experimental novel, *Flesh and Blood* (1994). It is a collection of short stories with a circular and never-ending structure, in which the readers first know the beginnings of all the stories until they get to the centre of the book, which is a poem, and then they are taken back to see the endings, moving from the last to the first story. So, in the first part of the story, "George", we meet a young English painter who spends the summers in the French coast of Etretat, looking for inspiration and painting the beautiful coastal landscapes of the area. When we get to the story of Georgina in the second part of the book, it is told like a documentary film script. A film director is planning a documentary about the life of Georgina Mannot, a famous English painter whose interesting and unusual life is told. It is then that the reader discovers that Georgina Mannot signed her paintings as G. Mannot, something that "indicated her ambivalence, her wish for secrecy and her love for disguises" (*Flesh* 155), as the letter G could stand both for Georgina and for George, and this is what takes the reader to the previous story of George. Immediately afterwards, we are told how Georgina "allowed herself two selves, two lives, or was it three? Her life as a woman in London, her life as a man in France, his/her experience at the moment of crossing over from one to the other and back again" (*Flesh* 156).

Therefore, Georgina, born a woman, transformed herself into a man, George, when she was in France, and again into a woman when she was back in London. This clearly reminds us of the change suffered by Léonie in *Daughters of the House* and by Roberts herself between England and France, for Georgina is also an in-between character. She is the daughter of a French father and an English mother (there is a slight difference in her case, since Léonie and Roberts were both born to an English father and a French mother). In the same way as Léonie, Georgina also found her true self when she was in the waters of the English Channel in the voyage from France to England and vice versa. However, while Léonie found her true identity and she connected it with language, for Georgina, this change between countries is marked not by the change of languages but of gender:

Two bodies, apparently separate and different, male and female, which were joined together by the to-ing and fro-ing between them. One skin stitched to the other then ripped off, over and over again. Two separate land masses, one called England and one called France, which were connected by the sea drawing itself back and forth, back and forth, between them. Her parents: a French man and an English woman, with the Channel between them, with the sea (herself in those waters?) held in their arms. She



made herself into a marriage. She married two split parts of herself, drew them together and joined them, and she also let each other flourish individually. (*Flesh* 156).

As we can see, the waters of the Channel are again a key element in this story, for it is where the protagonist found her true identity, where she merged her French and her English parts, her male and female parts, that became one in the middle of the Channel only to be a different self when s/he reached the other shore. It is not only that s/he was seen as the “other” in the other country as happened to Léonie, because apart from culture or language, George/Georgina was the “other” inside him/herself due to her double gender identity, a man in France, a woman in England, and only a whole and true self in the waters that separated both countries.

It should be stated at this point that the sea voyage has also been described as a negative experience in postcolonial literature. As Torabully puts it taking into consideration the Indian postcolonial paradigmatic experience, “the sea voyage bears very strange, troublesome, muffled and censored echoes among the Indian descendants” because it was “a traumatic experience” (158). However, despite this, he also acknowledges that “by giving this marine essence to the text, what was sought was not only a poetic universe or atmosphere, but primarily a space where this trauma could be revisited, and once this has been done, the sea voyage was chosen as the space of the metaphorical construction of a new identity” (159).

Actually, the image of the sea as a safe place for the in-between is also seen in more than a few postcolonial writings. Just to name some examples, an instance of the notion of being healed by water settled in a postcolonial environment can be found in the Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé’s *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986). This time, the reader is presented with a woman protagonist in search of her true self and she finds it, as Roberts’s characters, when crossing the sea:

It was the sea that healed me. Her great, wet hand pressed against my forehead. Her salts filled my nostrils. Her bitter potion moistened my lips. Gradually, I pieced myself together. (119).

Analogously, in her analysis of *Mother Tongue* (1990), the first book by Emine Sevgi Özdamar, a German-Turkish borderland woman writer, Azade Seyhan describes how Özdamar uses the image of the split body of the in-between protagonist being healed in the ocean waters, an element, as she describes “that knows no borders and boundaries” (85). This appears in Roberts’s texts too. This in-betweenness, this merge of cultures, and the going from one to another, takes place in the waters, in our case, of the British Channel. In the water true language and true self are restored to Léonie and George/Georgina; there are no boundaries, just a “current of promised bliss”. There was no difference in language, and therefore no difference in culture either; according to the protagonists, in the water nothing was foreign.

As Seyhan points out, this image of the water as restoring the true identity for the in-between also appears in the most acclaimed book by the Chicano writer Gloria Anzaldúa’s, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). In that text she explores what living in the borderland between two cultures means to her, taking into account not only the physical separation of that frontier but also questions of race, gender and



identity. To her, “*el mar* [the sea] does not stop at borders. Standing at the edge between earth and ocean, her heart surges to the beat of the sea. With the ease the ocean touches the earth and heals, the narrator switches codes.” (qtd. in Seyhan 84-85). Thus, we can see in Anzaldúa the same feeling experienced by Léonie when she reached French land and she realised this because of the switching of languages.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding language, there is something else that Roberts shares with other writers with a double nationality: the introduction of the other language into their writings, even bilingual writing, and the search for a place they can belong to. Concerning the use of two languages when writing, Roberts’s novels, especially *Daughters of the House*, although written in English, are full of French words and expressions, mainly related to the French culture, especially to food. These words are not translated into English, and even though most of them are not crucial for the understanding of the text, it is worth mentioning the fact that they are present in the novel. Many other writers from the borders have included words or sentences in their other language, as Seyhan explains, “because they expect the reader to engage in a more informed and conscientious way with another discursive practice, with willingness to know about the other, somehow to reclaim the other’s language” (87-88). This happens in a more obvious way in Roberts’s short story “*Une Glossaire*/A Glossary”, where we can find complete sentences written in French (with no translation provided) that a reader who does not speak French would not understand at all; as well as in *A Piece of the Night*, where even the name of the protagonist is full of meaning, for Julienne makes reference to the French name of a soup that her family ate every night, made of a mixture of vegetables, which could be also seen as a representation of her mixed identity.

In this manner, we can clearly perceive Anzaldúa, Özdamar and Condé’s texts as valuable examples of how the sea and the voyage from one place to another and thus from one culture to another have been used in the same way Roberts does in her writings: the sea is for all of them the place where the in-between characters change languages and identities, as well as a borderless place where the split personality can be at ease because waters cannot be divided and, therefore, the only place where the in-between protagonists do not feel foreign. However, in the case of Roberts, this link between the restoring of true self, true language, true and whole identity with water, appears also connected with two other very important elements in Roberts’s literary production: the feminine and the unconscious.

### 3. WATER, THE FEMININE AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

Water has been historically considered as a feminine element, as well as has many times been linked with the unconscious. An example that clearly illustrates this connection can be found in Carl Jung’s theory, for he saw water as an archetype present in the collective

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<sup>2</sup> Particularly remarkable in Léonie’s experience as an in-between is the change of language as a key element that separates her double self. As in many examples of postcolonial writing, the change of languages is connected to otherness and hybridity. Besides, in this novel it is also related with the element of water, as in many feminist and psychological studies, since we cannot forget that feminism lies under Roberts’s narrative production, as will be explained later on in this paper.



unconscious and therefore present in all of us. He considered water, together with earth, as passive, and therefore feminine elements in contrast with fire and air, which were, for him, active and thus male elements. Likewise, according to Jung, water is linked to the unconscious. In a study of his work, Welch interprets from Jung's thinking that

The entrance into one's unconscious is often imaged as entrance into water. Or the flooding of consciousness by the unconscious may be imaged as a flood of water in some form. Psychologically, water refers to spirit that has become unconscious. It does not, then, mean a regression to an inferior life but a descent to depths where there is a possibility for nourishment. Healing and new life can be the result of entering these waters. (60).

Taking a closer look at the idea of healing, Jung observes that water "has healing value, because it brings things back to their origin, where nothing is disturbed, yet everything is still right [...] water is healing simply because it is the low condition of consciousness where everything is undisturbed and can therefore fall into the right rhythm" (61).

In the same way, Roberts herself has linked the sea with the unconscious and with the notion of being "healed" in the water, as she explained in her interview with Bastida-Rodríguez:

think I feel at home in that [the unconscious], and I know why: it's because of the sea [...] I've got the sea inside me, and the sea was what was between England and France, and it's where I felt most at home as a child, because I never knew: Was I English? Was I French? On the sea, back and forth in a boat, I was at home, and somehow the sea and the unconscious became the same thing. (96).

This conception of water as a healing element that Roberts herself felt is precisely what we see in her writings. The suffering for being a split subject felt by her in-between women protagonists, Léonie and Georgina, was immediately healed in the waters of the Channel, since it was in these waters where they achieved unity, and found their true identity. As Stokowski points out, "water symbols are often used as referents for interconnectedness, and to imply wholeness and totality" (136). Following this idea, in these cases, there is no difference between French and English, man and woman: the moment true language and true self are restored to the protagonists Léonie and Georgina is in this travel through the Channel. It is only when they are surrounded by water, neither in England nor in France, that languages, cultures and identities melt and become only one. Thus, from this connection of their two halves, they get a true identity and the wholeness the sea represents.

It is worth noting here that in the same way as for Léonie "the secret changeover" of places, languages and cultures took place "in the night" (*Daughters* 36), Georgina's change of places and of gender

was performed out of sight, in darkness, in the middle of the night, on the cross-Channel steamer. Georgina Mannot got on to the boat, and George Mannot disembarked on the other side. [...] Her truth was a trick performed in the darkness of the Ladies's Cabin of the overnight boat to France. (*Flesh* 156-157)



However, in these changes there is not only a link between water and the element of the unconscious, but here there is also a connection between the unconscious and the element of darkness. As C.G. Jung affirmed in his study of the collective unconscious, as “day and light are synonyms for consciousness”, the same are “night and dark for the unconscious” (167). Therefore, despite their negative connotations, night and darkness are here positive for the protagonist’s construction of her true identity.

Another example of the connection of water with the feminine can be found in the works of the French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous. As previously mentioned, feminism is a recurrent topic in Roberts’s writings, and the influence of French feminists in her written production is undeniable. For Cixous, water is also one of the main symbols of the feminine: to her, “the inside of the water is truth and [...] the lack of water is felt as a kind of feminine castration” (qtd. in Andermatt-Conley 100). In this case, what Léonie feels coincides with Cixous’s assertion, as it is in the water, or in connection with the water, that Léonie and Georgina find truth —true language, true self, true identity.

Additionally, Cixous also links women with the element of water and with the unconscious because of the relationship between mother and child. To her, women “know how *s’éautrer* (to become other in birth water) as *mer-mère* (sea-mother) and to communicate preverbally from unconscious to unconscious” (qtd. in Andermat 100). Therefore, we feel at home and safe in the ocean’s water as we do in the waters of the mother’s womb. The relationship with the mother is also a topic extensively dealt with by Michèle Roberts.

Indeed, some other studies such as that of Sarah Falcus have pointed out the importance of water in Roberts’s novels in relation with the semiotic and the maternal in novels such as *The Looking Glass* (2000) or *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987). The latter is actually a re-writing of the biblical story of the Flood and the construction of the Ark, a job which is, this time, accomplished by a woman, Mrs Noah. What Mrs Noah provides with the creation of her Ark is a place where women can tell their own stories, as a way to fight back the canonical and male-dominated narratives that have forgotten them in literature, history and religion; a place for women who have been silenced because they did not fit in the role imposed on them by men. To Falcus, the Ark, which is surrounded by water, is a metaphor for the maternal womb, which gives the protagonists a sense of freedom (80).<sup>3</sup>

Linked to this view of life connected to water and the maternal, Jung also provides a similar connection. To him, “whenever water appears it is usually the water of life, meaning a medium through which one is reborn. It symbolizes a sort of baptism ceremony, or initiation, a healing bath that gives resurrection or rebirth (...) the return to such condition has healing value, because it brings back to their origin where nothing is disturbed, yet everything is still right” (61).

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<sup>3</sup> Analogously, and taking the idea of wholeness and freedom connected to feminist thoughts is also seen in Gruss’s study of this novel. To her, “the idea of being without borders as a typical feminine state that defies patriarchal closure tends to play into the hands of patriarchal assumptions about female sexuality and writing” (46).





Therefore, water is connected to the feminine and the unconscious and as a gateway to freedom for Roberts's female protagonists, as water is something that cannot be split, but as a symbol for wholeness, which is precisely what they achieve in their travels through the waters of the Channel, finding their true identity and being healed from their feelings of displacement and non-belonging.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In a very autobiographical manner, Roberts deals with concepts such as hybridity and double self in many of her writings. Even though these terms have traditionally been linked with the postcolonial world and Roberts has no connection to it, she has suffered from displacement as she belongs to two different cultures, the English and the French. In a similar way, her female protagonists in *Daughters of the House* and in the stories of "George" and "Georgina" in *Flesh and Blood*, present the point of view of the outsider. As happened to Roberts herself, in both novels, the protagonists' mixed origins —half English – half French make them feel as "others" in both countries: they are seen as foreigners in both to the point that they can only find their true identity, true language, and true self when travelling from one country to another, in the middle of the waters of the English Channel.

Interestingly enough, the sea has many connotations in these and other novels by Roberts, and they are also shared up to some point with postcolonial literature and with many examples of literature written from the margins, such as feminist literature or literature of the borderlands. In all these cases, water is also linked with transformation and healing of the in-between characters.

At the same time, the element of water is also connected in these novels with two of Roberts's favourite topics: femininity and the unconscious. These two topics are very present in Roberts's literary production. Here, the in-between protagonists are women, and that is where the connection of all these elements can be identified. Léonie, Georgina and Roberts herself can only find their true identity in the water, which has been, together with the unconscious, traditionally considered as a feminine element. In addition, water is defined as an element which cannot be split, which has no borders and which reminds of the safety of the mother's womb, and hence a place in which the in-between is healed and reborn to find a new identity, where all their parts, in which they had been divided, are joined back.

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