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# “Feminist reclaiming of water metaphors”

*Waterphors 2024, Université Jean Moulin, Lyon III*

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## INTRO

Women’s symbolic relationship to water is as old as recorded history.

A great number of origin myths conceptualise the world as springing forth from water, very often in the form of a woman.

In Ancient Egypt, for example, the goddess Nu (lit. “the watery one”) is the personification of the primordial watery abyss from which all life arose.

There are so many metaphors that connect water and women, and they have changed shape and been used in various ways over the centuries.

In this presentation I propose to examine 3 main areas:

- How both water and women have been conceptualised as resources to be exploited.
- How feminists have reclaimed water metaphors as a symbol of subversive and indirect resistance
- How they are currently spearheading an epistemological revolution in our conception of water itself.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, METHODOLOGY & CORPUS

The theoretical framework that informs this presentation is feminist theory and conceptual metaphor theory.

My corpus is a fairly eclectic collection of feminist literature, feminist historiography and policy documents on water scarcity.

I follow Charteris-Black’s methodology of Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black 2004).

Critical b/c I begin from the assumption that metaphors play an essential role in how we understand reality.

And that this construction of reality is not neutral. It benefits some groups over others. My analysis is therefore critical in the sense that it highlights the gender power dynamics involved in water metaphors.

## PART I) WATER (+ NATURE in general) IS A WOMAN

Because water is part of the natural world, women have been traditionally associated with Nature as a whole, not just water.

The Scientific Revolution (that took place during the 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> C) fundamentally changed our conceptualisation of Nature (and therefore water). Nature went from being conceptualised as a nurturing mother, “an organic view of nature as a living, growing, self-actualizing being” (Merchant, p170) to a “bride” (p.9), or a “common harlot” (p170) whose “primary function was to comfort; nurture, and provide for the well-being of the male.” (p;9).

Science would be the tool to enable men to extract Nature’s secrets so that she could be dominated and exploited.

This statue is a perfect example of this metaphor. It is called “Nature unveiling herself before science” and is an excellent example of what feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey has termed “the male gaze” (seeing the world through the eyes of a heterosexual man)

If Nature is personified as a half-clothed, submissive woman, who is science? Although it is not explicit, we can guess that science would be personified as “a fully clothed man, whose gaze [...] is bold, direct, and keen, the penetrating gaze of intellectual and sexual mastery” (Literary critic Elaine Showalter 1992: 145). So, if NATURE IS A WOMAN, the corollary is that SCIENCE IS A MAN. Women are intuitive, men are rational.

Once science had provided the tools to better understand and control water, men could build dams and divert rivers. They could control water. The large dam-building projects in the USA and USSR post-WWII were based on “the belief that **nature ought to be controlled** — indeed **could be controlled** — through the melding of

scientific study, large-scale technology, and appropriate government structures. The utilitarian aspects [...] came from a deeply ingrained belief among specialists in both countries that **water had an obligation to humanity**, indeed, a **moral duty**, to fulfil many missions before it flowed wastefully into the sea.” (Josephson 2002: 68 quoted in Goatly, 2007: 291).”

Feminists have highlighted the link between this view of water (and Nature in general) as a “neutral, and passive resource [...] as an inanimate commodity to be regulated and managed” (Hayman, 2012: 23), and the way that the female body has been conceptualised in similar ways.

Margaret Atwood, draws on this link in *The Handmaid’s Tale*:  
Offred, the main character, says:

*“I can’t think of myself, my body, sometimes, without seeing the skeleton: how I must appear to an electron. A **cradle of life**, made of bones; and within, hazards, warped proteins, bad crystals jagged as glass. Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers.”*

Offred’s body was once a cradle of life, just like water. Humans’ over-exploited and pollution of the waters, has resulted in the pollution of human bodies and a dramatic rise in infertility. Now it is women’s bodies that are being exploited and treated as a national resource that has a duty to produce children:

*“I cannot avoid seeing, now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It’s supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that. **I am a national resource.**”*

Let’s try to summarise the metaphors that I have talked about in this part. The conceptual metaphor is

WATER IS A WOMAN

Source = women / the female body

Target = water

Metaphor	Aspects of target (water)	Aspects of source (women / the female body)	Entailment
WATER (NATURE in general) IS A WOMAN  (therefore SCIENCE / CULTURE IS A MAN)  (E.g., <i>Nature unveiling herself before science</i> )	Nature holds many secrets to be explored.  Science is the tool which will allow men to conquer nature (e.g., dam-building projects).	The female body was/is a mystery to science.  Women’s behaviour is a mystery to men.	Women’s bodies are there to be enjoyed / exploited by men.  Women are passive (men are active).  Women are intellectually inferior, more intuitive (men are more intellectual, more logical, more scientific).
WATER IS A NATIONAL RESOURCE  (E.g., “my body [...]. A cradle of life [...]. I am a national resource.” (Atwood))	Water is a national resource that has a duty to sustain human life and growth.	The female body is (usually) capable of carrying and giving birth to children.  Nations need population growth (or at least stability) to retain political and military power.	It is women’s duty to the nation to have babies.

## PART II): FEMINIST RESISTANCE IS WATER

In my second part, I'd like to focus on how feminists have reclaimed water metaphors and used them as a symbol of resistance.

Many feminist writers have used the metaphor of water in order to invoke this particular kind of subversive resistance.

In her feminist dystopian novel *Earthsong* (1994), Suzette Haden Elgin describes a world in which women have no power, no legal rights, and are completely oppressed by men. One of the characters (who, not coincidentally is a Native American) names a group of linguist women the "Meandering Water Tribe". When asked why, he replies,

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*"Because you linguist women don't go in a straight line from A to B to C. You go this way a while, and that way a while, and this way again, instead. And you go gently and quietly. But you get there, always! You meander, as water meanders, headed for the oceans ... and then you arrive."*

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Margaret Atwood draws on the same idea in *The Penelopiad* (2005). When Penelope is trying to protect herself from her suitors' unwanted advances, she remembers the advice of her mother (who was a Naiad, or water nymph):

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*"I knew it would do no good to try to eject my unwanted suitors, or to bar the palace doors against them. If I tried that, they'd turn really ugly and go on the rampage and snatch by force what they were attempting to win by persuasion. But I was the daughter of a Naiad; I remembered my mother's advice to me. Behave like water, I told myself. Don't try to oppose them. When they try to grasp you, slip through their fingers. Flow around them." (Atwood 2005: 107-108)*

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Interestingly, the word "naiad" derives from an Ancient Greek word meaning "to flow" or "running water". Here water is not static, it is dynamic and fluid and hard to contain.

On the one hand, this is good advice for feminists. When in a powerless position, use more indirect, subversive techniques to achieve your goals.

The advice to be like water has its practical utility, but I think that Atwood is also indirectly criticising a world in which women are not seen as equals, but as sexual objects, a world in which women have to be careful about how they resist. If they openly resist, they'll be punished. Assertive behaviour in women, esp when rejecting men, will just get them in trouble. In a world where women were more powerful, they wouldn't need to employ such tactics.

This kind of activism was seen in the Hong Kong "be water" demonstrations in 2019-20 in response to the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill.

In order to avoid repression, activists adopted a "be water" strategy. They were strong like ice; fluid like water; they gathered like dew; and scattered like mist (Matthews 2023).

These water metaphors were used to shape the strategy of the protest "becoming a kind of self-positing rationale for how best to proceed." (Matthews 2023), and demonstrating the very material consequences of the kinds of metaphors we choose to use.

To summarise this part, the metaphor conceptual metaphor is FEMINIST RESISTANCE IS WATER.

Source = water

Target = feminism

Metaphor	Aspects of source (water)	Aspects of target (feminism)	Entailments
FEMINIST RESISTANCE IS WATER  (E.g., "Behave like water, I told myself. Don't try to oppose them. When they try to grasp you, slip through their fingers. Flow around them." Atwood)	Water is sometimes difficult to hold / contain.	Many women face oppression and discrimination. If they fight back openly and directly, they will be punished.	When in a powerless position, adopt subversive tactics to achieve one's goals.

### PART III) Feminist intervention in the current crisis

In my final part, I'd like to focus on the current water crisis and how feminists are actively involved in trying to change the metaphors we use to talk about water itself.

Water scarcity disproportionately affects girls and women. Women and girls are the ones who walk for miles to collect water for their families. Not only is this physically very demanding, they often face many dangers along insecure routes where they may face sexual harassment and violence. For these women, the water crisis is not only political, but also very personal.

Water scarcity is now therefore firmly on the feminist agenda.

Part of the problem is climate change, but another part is the way that multinational corporations **conceptualise water as a commodity** in countries where the water supply has been privatised.

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*"We know water is the source of life. But it can also be a source for portfolio diversification. Like gold and oil, water is a commodity — and it happens to be rather scarce nowadays. So, as with any other scarcity, the water shortage creates investment opportunities."*

<https://www.investopedia.com/articles/06/water.asp>

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Juxtaposition of image of women & girls carrying water and above quote — disturbing.

The problem, according to many researchers is what they term "modern water". The idea of Modern water emerged with around the Industrial Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> C (which the Scientific Revolution paved the way for). Modern water is the "instrumentalisation [and commodification] of a universal resource." (Matthews 2023). It is "water [...] stripped of its wider environmental, social, and cultural contexts and reduced to a scientific abstraction – to mere H<sub>2</sub>O." (front matter / back cover of Linton (2009))

What feminists are currently trying to do is envisage new ways, of thinking about our relationship with water, which are actually not that new at all but that go back to the premodern era.

One particular movement in feminism, called "hydrofeminism" has questioned what constitutes our bodies in the first place. Our human bodies are, after all, made up of about 60% water and Lakoff and Johnson (1980) already "recognised the significance of the human body for mapping metaphors of all kinds" Matthews (2023: 1835).

Ecofeminist philosopher, Astrida Neimanis, proposes reimagining oneself as a *body of water*. (Neimanis 2013, p.23):

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*"My body — like yours — primarily comprises water. My existence as a body of water is a biological fact, but living my embodiment as watery — embedded in a world that I share with other human, animal, vegetable, geophysical and meteorological bodies that also comprise water — has other implications as well. We are all bodies of water." (p.24)*

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This is really interesting b/c we are now not strictly in the realm of metaphor. We now kind of have one foot in metaphor and one in the literal world b/c we are literally 60% water. There is an attempt to blur the boundaries between categories, so that we forced to reevaluation our relationship with other beings in the world and realise that "we are not separate from our 'environments' [...] and that we have [...] obligations to bodies beyond human ones." (Neimanis 2013, p.25)

Here we have the "metaphor" (although I'm not sure how much of a metaphor it is!) of **HUMANS ARE BODIES OF WATER**.

This metaphor was used by ecofeminists in 2016 with the protest at Standing Rock, in the USA. The state govt had approved a 1000-mile long Dakota Access Pipeline which would lie just north of Standing Rock Sioux Reservation.

Environmentalists and Native Americans expressed concerns about the impact that the pipeline would have on their environment and in particular on the water that ran through their land. In order to highlight their important connection with the water running through their land, they used the slogan “we are water”.

This highlights the conception of water as something that we are not completely separate from. For this community, water is not just an inanimate object, but part of an interconnected living organism that should be protected.

One result of this is the metaphors **WATER IS A UNIFIER**

The resistance at Standing Rock and its central slogan that “Water is Life”, has had a profound international effect resulting in **network-building** between the Native American water protectors and Irish water activists.

Transforming water into “**a mediator of new solidarities**” (Matthews 2023)

In this part, I’ve spoken about 3 conceptual metaphors:

WATER IS A COMMODITY

HUMANS ARE WATER and

WATER IS A UNIFIER

Metaphor	Aspects of source	Aspects of target	Entailments
WATER IS A COMMODITY (“the water shortage creates investment opportunities.”)	Commodities can be contained, bought and sold.	If water can be contained it can be bought and sold.	Water is something that can be owned, therefore bought and sold. If you can’t afford it, you can’t have any. It’s not a right.
HUMANS ARE BODIES OF WATER	Water is abundant on Earth.  All living things are made predominantly of water and need it to survive.	The human body is at made up of about 60% water.	We should see ourselves, not as separate from nature, but as part of it.  We are not at the top of a hierarchy, but part of an interdependent rhizomic structure. All elements in this giant living organism are dependent on each other.  Polluting water = polluting humans.
WATER IS A UNIFIER	Something that creates a social link between humans and makes us responsible for each other.	Water is able to bond with many different elements.	Water plays an active role in society. It fulfils all kinds of important social and cultural roles that bind us and remind us that we are all in this boat (sinking ship?) together.

There are lots of other metaphors that ecofeminists are also using, that I didn’t have time to talk about today, such as:

- Water is a healer
- Water is a teacher
- Water is a storyteller
- Water as a (non-human) possessor of rights."
- Water is heritage held in stewardship
- Water is a (human) right
- Water is a common good
- Water is a sacred gift

What they all have in common is a "rejection of utilitarian, managerial attitudes toward nature", a "refusal to accept definitions of water as a commodity" and a "call for an ethic in which humans see themselves as part of a "community of interdependent parts." (Linton?)

## CONCLUSION

To conclude my presentation, I've looked at how water (and nature in gen) has been conceptualised as a female body. When Nature became simply resources to be controlled and exploited by science, the female body was also able to be seen as a national resource.

But feminists have reclaimed water metaphors as a subversive tactic of resistance. This tactic is useful and practical but also only makes sense b/c we live in a world where women are supposed to conform to certain ideals and where they will be punished for direct resistance.

What feminists (but not only) are trying to do today is start off another epistemological revolution in the way that we conceptualise water and our relation to it, including our very bodies. "Revolution" in its literal sense of re-volving, coming full circle, back to a premodern understanding of water as something that is part of us and something that we are part of.

Water is such a great metaphor b/c it's so flexible.

It is the ultimate "shape shifter". As a wave it can crash over you, as a current it can pull you along, as a trickle it can infiltrate into all kinds of nooks and crannies, as a drip it can wear away stone.

Thank you for listening!

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