# The Metaphor of Water in *Praisesong for the Widow*, *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Beloved*

**Kouadio Germain N'GUESSAN**
**Université de Cocody-Abidjan**

**Résumé**: Dans toutes les sociétés, l'eau demeure un élément vital et a des vertus essentielles. Lorsque les écrivains l'incorporent dans leurs textes, c'est très souvent pour relever ce fait. Elle sert alors de métaphore selon la réalité que tel ou tel auteur essaie de dépeindre. Dans *Praisesong for the Widow*, *The Women of Brewster Place* et *Beloved*, certaines de ces métaphores sont explorées. Ainsi, des métaphores de l'eau comme purification, comme source de vie, comme élément nutritif, ou encore comme sauveur, à celle de l'expression de la peur suite à une situation incontrôlable, c'est en grande partie la réalité culturelle africaine américaine liée à l'eau qui nous est donnée de parcourir. En somme, cet article met en scène l'utilité et la présence de l'eau dans la cosmogonie africaine américaine.
**Mots clés**: métaphore, eau, fiction, africain-américain, culture

One of the essential elements of the universe, water plays an important role in the life of man, animals and trees. Through its manifestations in tales, songs, feasts, it is at the core of myths, rituals, symbols and beliefs of any civilization. In the different revealed religions, water occupies a central position. It is used by Christians during rituals as aspersions or baptisms while Muslims use it to perform their ablutions before the prayer. In non revealed religions, it has a similar importance. In ceremonies such as worshipping and sacrifices, it is often used to accompany the invocation of ancestors. From then on, it is clear that water fulfills many functions: it saves, purifies or feeds according to the situation. By the same token, many novelists, playwrights and poets lean on water as a central theme and a metaphor to shed light on its different manifestations in the social realities of their respective communities. In this paper I explore some of these manifestations as they are blended in three African American novels, namely *Praisesong for the Widow*, *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Beloved*.

In the narratives of *Praisesong for the Widow*, *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Beloved*, the metaphors associated to water are characteristic of the importance of this element in the social reality of the novelists' communities. They incorporate it in their fictional world as a way of reliving this reality and retracing its precious value among their people. The first of these metaphors is related to its manifestation as a nutritive element or a source of life: it gives life, feeds, and sustains. In *Beloved*, for example, water is referred to as a source of life. The reader is told that Beloved arrives at 124 Bluestone Road out of the water thirsty and

exhausted. When offered water, she drinks it greedily as if "she had crossed the desert." (51) She also spends four days at 124 living on water: "She slept, waking and sitting only for water." (54) In these instances, the text lays emphasis on the nutritive function of water. It helps the girl to quench and to regain her health and strength. This function is also pointed out when Schoolteacher and his nephews milk Sethe like a cow (16). Their act aims at keeping the heroine's milk for Beloved while she is away. As a liquid, the milk thus symbolizes water as a source of food and of life. By trying to keep it for Beloved, they demonstrate its necessity as a feeding element for the well-being of the girl.

The reference to water as a nutritive device also skillfully permeates the narrative of *Praisesong for the Widow*. In the third chapter of the novel, like the thirsty phantom of Morrison's text, Marshall's heroine arrives at the rum shop of Lebert Joseph also very exhausted and thirsty after a long walk. Through the narrator's question "where was the person who ran the place so that she might ask for a glass of water?" (159), we perceive the nutritive character of water. In her distress, only water can restore Avey's strength as her voice expresses it while greeting Lebert Joseph: "Her parched throat could scarcely manage the words." (159) Another expression of this function of water finds illustration through the mixture of coconut water and rum the protagonist is finally offered by the old man. But her need for water is so urgent that she drinks it even though she is told that the coconut water is mixed with some drops of white rum. The action of the alcohol derived from the rum on her is immediate:

> In no more than seconds it had spread from her stomach out into the rest of her body, moving through her like the stream of cool dark air that had greeted her when she first entered the rum shop. Spilling into the dry river bed of her veins. Before she had finished half the glass, it had reached out to her dulled nerves, rousing and at the same time soothing them; and it was even causing the pall over her mind to lift again. (174)

The image of fire exemplified by the mixture on the heroine "the drink soothe[s] her parched throat and begin to circle her stomach like a ring of cool wet fire" (174) highlights what Bachelard (1949, 137-59) terms "l'alcool: l'eau qui flambé" (alcohol: the water that burns). Indeed, in his interpretation of the different effects of alcohol, the philosopher argues that it is a water that burns the throat. It is also an instant nutrient that immediately puts its warmth in the chest (1949, 139). Farther, still discussing the effects of this "water" on the body, he concludes that someone who drinks it can burn like it (152). But here, the burning is not the complete destruction that we usually see when we put something in a fire, but it is rather internal. What I call fire is then the inflammation of any of the organs through which

the alcohol passes to finally melt in the body. From the throat, it goes down to the stomach while provoking such a pain that it is as if the person who has drunk it has his throat or his stomach inflamed. This is what Marshall's protagonist exactly experiences.

Later on, when Avey joins the group for the excursion to Carriacou at the invitation of Lebert Joseph, she experiences a situation that puts forward another metaphor of water. But before analyzing this metaphor, it is worth analyzing first the title of the third chapter of the book in that this helps understand the metaphor linked to Avey's experience. Entitled "Lavé Tête," this title sounds more French (even though it is from Caribbean language). In English, it may mean "washing the head." It therefore suggests an act of cleansing for, if the head must be washed, it is because it is dirty; it is impure. The washing then symbolizes the removal of its dirt and impurity. As a matter of fact, this title indicates a purgative process through which Avey goes during the whole excursion. Now concerning the metaphor of water that can be read in this experience, it finds expression in the heroine's vomiting on her way to Carriacou with other inhabitants of the island. Indeed, during a prayer, she goes into some sort of trance. Her stomach convulses and she starts vomiting (204-205). Everything she ate that day propels out:

> The gouts of churned-up, liquefied food irrupted repeatedly, staining for a moment white spume on the waves bellow […] When, after what seemed the longest time, the large meal she had eaten that morning was exhausted, there followed an endless stream of fluids the color and consistency of a watery lime gelatin. (205-206)

Her agonizing experience recalls Sethe's pain in *Beloved* when, while massaging her bloody feet after a long distance crawl with Amy in search of velvet, the latter warns her: "It's gonna hurt now. Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (35). In the case of Avey, the experience is more painful because the alcohol makes her lose control of her "self" to the point that she no longer knows where she is. For her, what seems to come back to life but violently hurts is her struggle to regain her lucidity. But unfortunately, she cannot resist the effect of the alcohol and is compelled to succumb, offering a shameful spectacle to her traveling companions: "The tears being forced from her eyes by the violence of each contraction mixed with the mucus streaming from her nose and the acids and the bile off her raging stomach." (206) The action of what should normally be a brandy for her intensifies when the vomiting couples with diarrhea to make her misfortune more pathetic, more tragic and even more shameful:

> For no reason, after what in her agony seemed to be hours, the contractions changed direction. Instead of passing up through her emptied stomach into her throat, they reversed themselves

> and began – she could feel them! – moving down into the well of her body. All of a sudden, before she could even grasp what was taking place, the powerful spasms were reaching deep into her. She tried clearing her head of the dimness. She started to ask herself some unformed question. But it was already too late. Because with the sudden shift in direction, the bloated mass that couldn't be – whatever was left of it – was being propelled down also. Down past her navel. Down through the maze of her intestines. Down into her bowel. (207)

From this scene, the reader discovers that water is no longer a source of life. It now plays a purifying function. This unveils the metaphor of water as a means of purification. That of Avey is achieved when her stomach cannot keep what she consumes to regain her strength. The vomit she propels out in her long agony can thus be read as what her body refuses to accept, the impurities in her body. This purifying function of water the protagonist experiences through the effect of the rum puts forward the theme of purification in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Though not profusely used in Naylor's text as in *Beloved* or *Praisesong*, water appears in instances of so great importance that it calls for interpretation. For instance, while in *Praisesong* the purification operates as a purgation, in *The Women of Brewster Place*, it is carried out in a form of bodily bath to get rid of the stains caused by death. Thus, when Ciel loses her baby, she undergoes this ritual through the intermediary of Mattie, one of her neighbors:

> Slowly she bathed her. She took the soap, and, using only her hands, she washed Ciel's hair and the back of her neck. She raised her arms and cleaned the armpits, soaping well the downy brown hair there. She let the soap slip between the girl's breasts, and she washed each one separately, cupping it in her hands. She took each leg and even cleaned the toenails. Making Ciel rise and kneel in the tub, she cleaned the crack in her behind, soaped her public hair, and gently washed the creases in her vagina – slowly, reverently, as if handling a newborn. (104)

It is not because Ciel does not know how to take her bath herself. But Mattie's bathing of her embodies a ritual of purification. Water here serves to purify Ciel from the stains caused by the death of her baby. This act has also a cultural dimension and establishes a link between the writer and her African ancestry. Indeed, in many African societies, death is most of the time associated with stains. To be purified then, the people in mourning must go through a bathing process intended to make them get rid of their stains. Only after this process can they now experience a new life as cleaned people. Their social integration becomes henceforth effective since they can take part in public affairs. Generally, this process is implemented by elderly persons or people who have already gone through it. Thus, as the anchor for the other women of Brewster Place, Mattie symbolizes such elderly character. This is why Naylor uses her to perform this ritual. Also, by leaning on her, she revisits her cultural heritage and demonstrates her knowledge of her culture. The bathing process and particularly

the water used to perform it reveals both as a bridge and a medium between Sethe's former identity of stained character (an identity she is made to wear by the death) and the one she acquires after the bathing process. This couple helps her to go from one end to the other that is to say from impurity to purity, from uncleanness to cleanness.

In the writers' texts, water can also be read as the expression of fear in an unbearable or uncontrollable situation. For instance, when Sethe encounters Beloved for the first time, she immediately feels like passing water:

> For some reason she could not immediately account for, the moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe's bladder filled to capacity. She said, "Oh excuse me," and ran around to the back of 124. Not since she was a baby girl, being cared for by the eight-year-old girl who pointed out her mother to her, had she had an emergency that unmanageable. She never made the outhouse. Right in front of its door she had to lift her skirts, and the water she voided was endless. (*Beloved*, 51)

The water she profusely passes is not simply meant to satisfy a natural physiological need. It is rather the expression of the fear motivated by the unexpected presence of a young girl (who later proves to be the ghost of her daughter she killed some years earlier) at 124 and intends to evacuate this fear. This is all the more understandable as after murdering her little girl on the pretext that she wanted to prevent her from experiencing the atrocities of slavery, she cannot imagine her coming back to her. Consequently, the appearance of the phantom in her house creates in her nothing but a panic and a great fear. It is this fear that triggers her desire to pass water. On the other hand, Sethe's long making of water recalls the profuse flow of her amniotic liquid when she was giving birth to Denver: "Like a horse, she thought, but as it went on and on she thought, No, more like flooding the boat when Denver was born. So much water Amy said, 'Hold on, Lu. You going to sink us you keep that up." (51) At this level, the amniotic liquid hints at the metaphor of water as a frightening element. Its profusion frightens Amy to such an extent that she believes they will sink and end up tragically.

The last metaphor of water that draws my attention is related to the theme of salvation. Here water acts as a means of salvation. In *Praisesong*, this metaphor is offered through the legend of the Ibos who are thought to have the power to walk on water without drowning. The following passage well narrates this legend according to Aunt Cuney:

> Those Ibos was stepping! And they didn't bother getting back into the small boats drawed up here – boats take too much time. They just kept walking right on out over the river. Now you wouldna thought they'd of got very far seeing as it was water they was walking on. Besides they had all that iron on 'em. Iron on they ankles and they wrists and fastened 'round they necks like dog collar. 'Nuff iron to sink an army. And chains hooking up the iron. But chains didn't stop those Ibos none. Neither iron […] When they realized there wasn't nothing

> between them and home but some water and that wasn't giving 'em no trouble they got so tickled they started singing. (38-39)

Actually, what is of importance in the above quotation is not the supposed power of these Ibos but the place of water in their trip back to their ancestral homeland. Without using a boat or a plane, they walk on water to join their mother Africa. Water then appears as a means of escaping or of freeing themselves from bondage. It also expresses their refusal to be enslaved. This scene provides the text with a biblical connotation and helps foster African Americans' religious belief. Indeed, in the Book of Exodus, water helped the Jews in their flight to the Promised Land. It saved them from bondage in Egypt. We clearly perceive that in both situations, water plays a fundamental role in the survival of the two people undergoing the similar situation. By inscribing this biblical reference in her text, Marshall partly reproduces Christian faith, testifying to its importance among African American communities. At the same time, she divinizes the Ibos and makes sacred their legend. On the other hand, in the same way water is revealed as a bridge between Ciel's identity of unclean person to the one she gets after she undergoes the bathing process, it also serves as a bond between the Ibos' identity of bondmen and that of freemen. It permits them to become free.

In various ways, *Praisesong for the Widow*, *Beloved* and *The Women of Brewster Place* profusely explore the metaphors of water to account for the social realities of the writers' communities. As a source of life, a means of purification or of salvation, etc., the introduction of water in these texts demonstrates its importance as an essential element among their people. Its different levels of manifestation as analyzed in this paper illustrate the culture of water as vital in any society. In the case of the works that constituted our corpus, this culture is the expression of a multiple and varied approach to water. Actually, some of these works deal more with the metaphor of water than others. For instance, while in *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Beloved* water is omnipresent as essential in the characters' experience, in *The Women of Brewster Place*, it only appears in a few instances. However, all combined, their treatment of the theme testifies to the presence of water at the very core of the life of human beings, animals and trees. Through their texts, Marshall, Naylor and Morrison demonstrate their awareness of this reality and act as witnesses for the importance of water among African Americans.

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