

CHAPTER-II
"SISTER OUTSIDER"

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A “Sister Outsider”

Dickinson was born in a conventional middle-class family in mid-nineteenth-century America. As a child of her time, she shared attitudes and interests of her contemporary women and conformed to their general life-pattern. Outwardly, she did not markedly deviate from the usual norm. In private life, she was a domestic woman and remained unmarried like many of her fellow women. In nineteenth-century America, domestic obligations were considered the most important by all women, irrespective of social classes. Harriet Martineau thus generalized on the issue under discussion: "All American ladies should know how to clear starch and iron: how to keep plate and glass: how to cook dainties: and if they understand the making of bread and soup likewise, so much the better" (Society in America 30). References to housework are quite common in the literary works by women writers. Susan Strasser in Never Done: A History of American House work (1982) offers an endless list of the domestic chores performed by the nineteenth-century women. Harriet Beecher Stowe's letter to her sister-in-law also reveals the countless household tasks she needed to perform at the time she was writing Uncle Tom's Cabin (Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe 128). Dickinson lived a secluded life and did not marry. Yet she had to do some of the household duties such as cooking, washing dishes, dusting, and knitting throughout her life. References to such domestic tasks are abundant in her letters. However much her mind was busy with poetic pursuits, her hands were often engaged with ordinary domestic chores. Joseph Lyman, a friend of the Dickinson family, comments: "Em is an excellent house keeper" (Sewall, The Life of Emily Dickinson Vol.1:87). So she knew the reality of contemporary women's lives intimately and portrays them in her verse sometimes with pity and sympathy, sometimes with subtle irony. For example, she describes

with quiet pathos in no. 187 the death of a house-wife who seems to represent countless ordinary women worn out by the perpetual burden of caring for others:

How many times these low feet staggered-
 Only the soldered mouth can tell- (187)

It is, however, subtle irony which informs no. 401 where she finds genteel women as "Soft Cherubic Creatures" and "Brittle" ladies. She was also conscious of her society's conception of women as weak, submissive and domestic. Her female persona is busy tidying a house littered by others: "The little note that others dropt/ I fitted into place" (1009). The poem "I would not paint a picture" (505) also shows her ironic awareness of women's role as conceived by society:

I would not paint- a picture-
 I'd rather be the One
 It's bright impossibility
 To dwell-delicious-on-

 Nor would I be a Poet-
 It's finer-own the Ear-
 Enamored-impotent-content- (505)

She knew society liked to associate femininity with powerlessness. So her 'I' in this poem portrays women as "enamored", "impotent" and "content", that is, in the orthodox feminine roles projected by society. Indeed, her sense of femininity profoundly informs her personal and literary self.

However, a close scrutiny of her life and poetry demonstrates that Dickinson's similarity to the women of her time is only superficial. She had strong individuality, a passion for truth and for authentic experience. This insistence on unfettered autonomy and truth marks her out. Her poems, written in private, and hardly published during her lifetime, demonstrate her strong individual self concealed under an apparently conformist exterior. Of her many

characteristic poems, 1453 and 1454 stand out from the rest revealing her inner self that would never be a "Counterfeit-a Plated Person" (1453). She considers truth "good Health-and Safety and the Sky" (1453) and proclaims her conviction that "Truth" also "outlasts the Sun" (1455). Since "we cannot own them both-/ possess the oldest one- "(1455). She stuck to this uncompromising passion for authenticity in poetic expression throughout her writing career.

Evidently, Dickinson rejected imposed beliefs and secondhand experiences. Her rejection of dogmatic religious faith (discussed in the next chapter) stemmed from this unwavering commitment to experiential truth. This insistence on personal experience also separates her from her contemporary women in general. Beneath the placid exterior of a gentle spinster, she was actually, as her poems testify, a "still Volcano", an apparently "still volcano" over which "grows the Grass" (1677) and where the bird chooses to rest, but which actually "Bear within-appalling Ordnance/ Fire, and smoke, and Gun :

Taking Villages for breakfast,
And appalling Men- (175)

In the privacy of her poems, she seems to be a free spirit indifferent to the so-called morals and manners prized by the women of the time. Her lyric speaker thus famously celebrates her limitless freedom:

Inebriate of Air-am-I
And Debauchee of Dew-
Reeling - thro endless - summer days -
From inns of Molten Blue - (214)

Instead of being herself a brittle gentlewoman whom she satirizes in poem 403, Dickinson prefers to be a "little Tippler/leaning against the - Sun" (214) or a "tramp" (Letters II:408) or a "Gypsy" (163). The rebellious individuality concealed

behind the mask of conformity comes out in another poem where she says: "I took my power in my Hand/ And went against the world" (540). More interesting in this context is the poem beginning with the line "I'm ceded - I've stopped being Theirs"-(508). The poem shows how she scorns the "perpetual childhood", "one of the careers open to women" of the time (Chase 94):

And They can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading - too - (508)

The speaker renounces her former self and chooses a new one consciously: "But this time - Adequate - Erect, / with Will to choose, or to reject ." (508). This strong individuality and self-assertion are the basic factors that separate her from her female contemporaries. Her letter to her friend Abiah echoes this desire for autonomy and authenticity. She is "grateful" that she is her own "self and not somebody else" (Letters 11:519).

Dickinson's refusal to marry was no unique thing in nineteenth century America. Many contemporary women remained single and lived like Dickinson as gentle spinsters in their fathers' houses. So apparently Dickinson's unmarried life has nothing uncommon about it. Much effort has been made to explain her rejection of marriage as a reaction to some disappointment in love or as resulting from a kind of neurosis. May be, there is a grain of truth in all these speculations. At the same time, it must be said that Dickinson renounced the conventional route to the fulfilment of her womanhood through marriage and motherhood to remain true to her authentic inner self. She spurned marriage to pursue her sacred vocation of a poet with the utmost dedication.

A married woman, in Dickinson's society, for all her brilliance, was doomed to be an unthinking, "timid and trusting bride" (Griswold 187). A.D.T. Whitney's

Hitherto (1869) and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's The Story of Avis (1877) were written in the later years of the nineteenth century. Both these novels explore the stultifying effects of conventional marriage upon a brilliant woman. Alexis de Tocqueville noted that in America "The independence of women is irrevocably lost in the bonds of matrimony" (Democracy in America 201). Elizabeth Oakes Smith expresses the same sentiment in her account of her own reluctant marriage at the age of sixteen to a man much older than herself: "I transformed myself to an utterly different creature from what had been native to me, how carefully I folded my wings. I had lost girlhood and found nothing better to take its place" (Selection from the Autobiography of Elizabeth Oakes Smith 45).

Numerous poems of the period attest that marriage and duty were often synonymous for nineteenth-century women. Both represented chiefly self-sacrifice, suffering and death of the individual. Elizabeth Oakes Smith's poem "The Wife" highlights this uncomplaining sense of duty and pliability expected of a wife. Maria Brook's poem "The Obedient love of Women her Highest Bliss" also records this renunciation of the intellectual life by women:

To every blast she bends in beauty meek;—
 Let the storms beat, - his arms her shelter kind, —
 And feels no need to blanch her rosy cheek
 With thoughts befitting his superior mind
 Who only sorrows when she sees him pained,

(Cited in Walker 51)

The third and the fourth line of the poem indicate a wife's abdication of the intellectual life, and the last line "who only sorrows when she sees him pained" implies her effacement of the self. As a sensitive and intelligent woman, Dickinson acutely felt this psychic cost of marriage. She did have the yearning for the promised mystical transformation of women's status through marriage (Letters Vol.I:209-10). She knew social identity was not available to a single woman.

Dickinson has the wife symbolize maturity, power and strength in poem after poem. Yet her painful awareness of the loss of self in marriage always hovers around and finally triumphs over the illusory happiness of the married state. Nearly forty of her poems are about marriage, figurative or actual. Her attitude to contemporary pattern of marriage shows up in the following poem:

I am "wife"- I've finished that -
 That - other state -
 I'm Czar- I'm "woman" now -
 It's safer so -
 How odd the girl's life looks-
 Behind this soft Eclipse-
 I think that Earth feels so
 To folks in Heaven now -
 This being comfort - then
 That other kind - was pain-
 But why compare?
 I'm "wife" ! Stop there ! (199)

The poem begins on a note of apparent assurance and ecstasy at the married state. But the concept of wedlock as heavenly security and legal maturity loses strength when the poet says that "This being comfort", the other kind must be "pain". Because the use of dashes and stops implies a lack of real conviction. This belief on the part of the married woman appears to be a mere delusion. The loss of self is quietly suggested by the word "Eclipse". Marriage is a kind of "Eclipse" that makes the women invisible. The subtle irony in the last two lines shatters the illusion created in the first stanza. The speaker wife refrains from comparing the two states as if afraid of unfavorable consequences. Dickinson associates married life with its safety and comfort with the afterlife. Her ambiguity poses an implied question. Can safety and comfort justify the "Eclipse" of a life?

Her most overt exploration of the effect of marriage on the individual woman is in poem no.732. Here Dickinson seems to imply that the "honorable Work" of woman and wife requires a rejection of woman's own potential, her "amplitude and awe". A woman's precious possession of the inner life is regarded as mere "Playthings" (732) in her married state. Her "Fathoms" must lie "unmentioned" and unrecognized. A wife's state is equated with death in "A wife at Daybreak I shall be". (461). "Eternity-I am coming Sir"- the bride says to her approaching husband. Death, Christ and husband all merge into one figure in the poem. Invisibility and silence are the qualities of death. These are also the qualities that were ascribed to nineteenth-century women as contemporary records and women's literature testify. Dickinson's "wife" poems clearly illustrate that for her too these qualities were inextricably mixed with the idea of marriage. Her ambivalence towards marriage might also grow from an unconscious rejection of the life of her mother. She herself noticed the usual plight of young, attractive women submitting to passivity, silence and invisibility leading to chronic illness as in the case of her mother.

So Dickinson's spinsterhood assumes a new dimension when we consider it against the background of her marriage poems, her experience of the contemporary women's lives and particularly against the background of her determination to make poetry the only vocation of her life. Poem 1072 is very revealing in this context. She knew well her contemporary society equated women with wife. To her also, the wife meant a mature, adult woman. In "Title Divine-is mine"(1072), Dickinson proclaims her conviction that she has achieved the status of "wife", meaning that of an adult woman, by just being a poet without taking on the legal identity of a wife :

Title divine - is mine- !
 The wife - without the Sign!
 Acute Degree-conferred on me -

Betrothed without the swoon
 God sends us Women - - (1072)

She has married her art and achieved the divine identity of a poet. And thereby she avoids the "swoon", loss of individuality, and of self-awareness that inevitably accompany marriage in her contemporary society. She also had the desire for the mystical transformation marriage seemed to offer. However, she achieves this not as a conventional wife but as a woman poet savouring the exhilaration of the creative act.

From her early girlhood, Dickinson was aware of her uniqueness and of her singular destiny. The sense of power she felt within herself shows through in her letter to her cousin Loo Norcross in the 1850s:

It's a great thing to be 'great' loo, and you and I might tug for a life,
 and never accomplish it, but no one can stop our looking on, and
 you know some cannot sing, but the orchard is full of birds, and
 we all can listen: What if we learn, ourselves, some day! (Letters
 vol.2:345)

As her letter testifies, she was precociously aware of her separate, poetic self: "you are growing wiser than I am, and nipping in the bud fancies which I let blossom-perchance to bear no fruit, or if plucked I may find it bitter" (Letters vol. 1:104). No Wonder, many of her poems articulate this awareness of her power and her inherent worth. One of her poems on the spider spells out her conception of her art to a perceptive reader:

The Spider holds a silver Ball
 In unperceived Hands -
 And dancing softly to Himself
 His Yarn of Pearl -unwinds - (605)

The "unperceived Hands" of the spider connects it with the unrecognized art of the "nobody" artist who refuses to compromise with an "admiring Bog" (288). Like the spider's invisible dancing, her art is also private and victorious:

Nor any know I know the Art
 I mention easy - Here
 Nor any Placard boast me
 It's full as Opera. (326)

Out of quiet conviction of her inherent worth, Dickinson scorns the conventional idea about a woman's life as insignificant, "small":

And then the size of this "small" life —
 The Sages-call it small —
 Swelled - like Horizons - in my vest-
 And I sneered softly - "small" ! (271)

Despite moments of literary uncertainty and despair, Dickinson perhaps was sure that the "tapestry" of her life that she wove like a spider in her poems would be ultimately remembered. The second stanza of poem no. 675 very subtly points to her hope about her poems kept secret in her table drawer:

The General Rose - decay -
 But this - in Lady's Drawer
 Make Summer - When the Lady lie
 In Ceaseless Rosemary - (675)

She uses uninflected verbs — "decay", "make", "lie" -to lift the situation from any definite historical context and imparts an aura of timelessness. True to her habit of telling things "slantly" she hopes that the "attar" in "Lady's Drawer", meaning her poems kept secretly in her table drawer, will make eternal summer. Indeed, she understood the quality of her work and trusted its power to counter oblivion. She was sure that the "I" of her poetry will have an eternal presence even when she would "lie in ceaseless Rosemary" (676).

So, in view of her awareness of her genius, it can be said that Dickinson's single life was a conscious choice. By renouncing marriage and motherhood and choosing absolute seclusion from society, she was able to avoid duty-bound domesticity and compulsory conventionality of a wife. The observation of Sandra Gilbert is worth quoting in this context: "Dickinson must have half-consciously perceived that she could avoid the necessity of renouncing her art by renouncing, instead, that concept of womanliness which required self-abnegating renunciation" (The Madwoman in the Attic 590). Adrienne Rich too thinks in the same vein when she says:

That Dickinson chose her seclusion knowing she was exceptional and knowing what she needed. She carefully selected her own society and controlled the disposal of her time. Given her vocation she was neither eccentric nor quaint. (Shakespeare's Sisters 100)

Loneliness thus was a potent source of her creativity.

So, under the surface conformity to the quiet life of a 'gentle spinster', Dickinson was an extraordinary woman, who chose to glow with the "white election" of her art even though this decision reduced her to a "Nobody" in her patriarchal society where only married women had some sort of status. Yet, she chose to be a childlike nobody rather than to become a wifely nobody. Contemporary spinsters, as are generally presented in the narratives of that time, tended the sick and left at death a packet of inspiring letters describing this ordeal. Dickinson too left packets of her writing. But she celebrated the adventure of her life in her poems instead of describing scenes of death and dying.

It is worth observing that Dickinson's childlike persona in both real life and in her art helped her much to keep her integrity against the demands her culture made on women. The pose of the child enabled her to assert her

independence and individuality. She won a freedom of some kind by refusing active participation in usual womanly activities of the time like joining sewing societies, music groups or church group, by not getting married. This refusal to lead a conventional woman's life kept her in a kind of childhood. The state of the child acted as a kind of retreat from the world's limiting expectation for women. Barbara Mossberg rightly thinks that "Dickinson's child persona is in large measure a crucial aspect of her systematic refusals to become bound in a conventional woman's life" ("Emily Dickinson's Nursery Rhymes", Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson. 60).

In fact, Dickinson stands all alone in her intense individuality. She shows hardly any important affinity with any section of contemporary women, be it conservative or liberal. She was beyond all recognized feminine types of the time. She had no enthusiasm for usual social and charitable work done by contemporary women's societies. She writes about such societies rather mockingly to her friend Jane Humphrey in 1850:

The Sewing Society has commenced again-and held its first meeting last week - Now all the poor will be helped - the cold warmed-the warm cooled-the hungry fed - - the thirsty attended to - the ragged clothed and this suffering-tumbled down world will be helped to it's [sic] feet again ... I don't attend-notwithstanding my high approbation - which must puzzle the public exceedingly. (Letters Vol.I:84)

Further, Karl Keller in his book Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty writes that in 1872 a contemporary novelist and reformer of women's condition Elizabeth Stuart Phelps wrote Dickinson requesting her participation in the women's cause (Keller 82-83). But her flat refusal of such social involvement comes out clearly from her reference to the matter in a letter to her cousin Louisa Norcross:

She wrote me in October, requesting me to aid the world by my

chirruph more. Perhaps she [meaning Elizabeth Stuart Phelps] stated it as my duty, I don't distinctly remember, and always burn such letters. - I replied declining. She did not write to me again - she might have been offended, or perhaps is extricating humanity from some hopeless ditch (Letters Vol.II:500)

She may have satirized women with moral causes in such a poem as the following:

She's tearful - if she weep at all -
 For blissful Causes - Most of all
 That Heaven permit so meek as her -
 To such a Fate - to Minister. (535)

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and other progressive women devoted their lives to the cause of women's social and moral reform. Reform for them meant improvement in dress, jobs, vocation, education, health, voting etc. Dickinson perhaps had her "approbation" of these things without being committed to them. She had a different sense of reality. Her "basket", as she says in a poem, holds nothing but "firmaments" (352), and her business is to explore her own self.

Julia Ward Howe was another illustrious, contemporary woman who wrote frequently in the Atlantic Monthly. Leyda tells us that Dickinson read Howe's summary of George sand's autobiography in the Atlantic Monthly in November 1861 (Years and Hours 2:37). T.W. Higginson also advised Dickinson to read Julia Howe's poem "Stake my life upon the Red" as an "example of good verse" (qtd. in Keller 228). So Dickinson, we may presume, was acquainted with Julia Ward Howe. Julia Howe insisted on the moral and ethical role of women in society. In one of her suffrage lectures, she says:

Revere the religion of home, ... keep its altar Flame bright in your heart... Return from your furthest flight to the dear shelter of your home. Make the place beautiful with your affection ... hang your

laurels, if you win any, upon its walls. (Florence Howe Hall. 171)

In her insistence on the role of women as the guardians of social morality, Howe belonged to the conventional majority of the period.

Besides Howe, Lydia Maria Child was one of the leading feminists of the time. She was a genuine liberal and a sincere religious feminist. In her Good Wives (1883) Mrs. Child projects her image of ideal American women: "Good American women are those who helped their husbands to fame, those who educate themselves within and to the benefit of their homes and those who publicly championed moral causes" (Keller 230). Women's movement represented by the Right wing activists such as Julia Ward Howe and Lydia Maria Child can be summarized in Elsa Green's terms as "the duty of cheerfulness, the practice of purity, the instinct for a domestic life elevated to an unearthly perfection" (Elsa Green 21). In other words, these illustrious women were all advocates of the "cult of true womanhood" (Welter 21), the attributes of which were piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Despite apparent conformity to this stereotype in her external life, Dickinson was temperamentally unable to fit in with this image of 'true woman'. The unique personal nature of her individuality made her incapable of identifying with either Julia Ward Howe or Lydia Maria Child. Julia Howe's insistence on the moral responsibility of women was uncongenial to Dickinson's absolutely nondidactic and amoral character. She was concerned solely with the development and exploration of the individual self. Autonomy of the self irrespective of any rigid pattern was her only concern. In many of her poems, she portrays herself as a "tramp" or a "Gypsy" or a "Little Tippler". These would have appeared certainly frivolous and too wilful for any acceptable model for American women. Similarly, Lydia Maria Child's definitions of ideal womanhood also could hardly include the Dickinsonian model of independent selfhood. To these heavenly women, Emily Dickinson's intense concern for independence and desire for "Menagerie splendour"(290)

was an unintelligible phenomenon. Moreover, all these illustrious women were quite satisfied with traditional religious teachings. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps writes in "Gates Ajar":

Most young women of my age have their dreams, and a future probable or possible, which makes the very incompleteness of life sweet, because of the symmetry, which is waiting somewhere (9)

Dickinson with her religious scepticism and its consequent anxiety and dread stands remote from such soothing assurances.

The name of Margaret Fuller also comes up invariably while discussing Dickinson's differences from the other illustrious women of the time. Margaret Fuller was one of the first editors of the contemporary literary magazine Dial. She was the foreign correspondent of the daily New York Tribune and the author of numerous works of which the most important is Woman in the Nineteenth Century, (1845), which may be called the intellectual foundation of the feminist movement. A tireless champion of the emancipation of women from social and moral bondage, she urged women to be courageous, self-reliant and confident: "Let them be sea-captains if they will" (qtd. in Keller 237). Woman in the Nineteenth Century presents a panorama of women and their lives through which Fuller tries to generate feminine self-confidence. Throughout the book there are references to individual women, female writers and characters. Those were to serve as witness to the genius women possess. In Woman in the Nineteenth Century, Fuller also developed the idea of sisterhood. She argued that women must band together to help each other. Her thinking was that man cannot understand a woman's needs or adequately represent her, no matter how noble or good-intentioned he is.

It is surprising that Emily Dickinson did not show any interest in Margaret Fuller also. There are hardly any references to Fuller in her letters. And no clear indication about her reading of Fuller's writing is also available; perhaps

she did not read her feminist writing. Karl Keller surmises that possibly Margaret Fuller's reputation as a transcendentalist kept Dickinson from reading her. Yet, there was much in Fuller that would have attracted her. Fuller's stand on independence and autonomy is almost like Dickinson's. Margaret Fuller wrote:

What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home. (qtd. in Keller 237)

Dickinson also speaks in the same key in a number of poems. She also wanted to be a woman, "Adequate, erect /with will to choose or to reject"(508)

Fuller's idea of sisterhood was also an active principle in Emily Dickinson's life. Awareness of the sisterhood of women and the quest for it in her personal as well as in her literary life is quite clear in her letters and poems. Her personal life shows her dependence on her "family of sisters". Her own sister was her constant companion. She had close emotional and intellectual companionship with a number of female friends (discussed in chapter 1). Thus she followed Fuller's concept of sisterhood, though in a personal way of her own.

In the area of art too, Dickinson considered herself part of a poetic sisterhood. To a woman, wanting to write, knowledge of a female tradition is a psychological necessity. Dickinson's quest for models among the famous women writers of her day, particularly among the English women writers of the generation preceding her own, is a case in point. Her main literary heroines were Elizabeth Barret Browning, the Bronte sisters, George Eliot and George Sand. They recur frequently in her letters and comments. Elizabeth Barret Browning was clearly the strongest female influence upon her. Dickinson wrote three tributes to Barret Browning in the year following her death. They are (1) "Her- 'Last poems' " — (312), (2) "I went to thank Her -" (363), and "I think I was enchanted" (593).

This last-named tells how the witchcraft of her poetry spellbound her:

I think I was enchanted
 When first a sombre Girl -
 I read that Foreign Lady -
 The Dark - felt beautiful (593).

She seems to have known Barret Browning's verse novel Aurora Leigh almost by heart. She wrote a poetic tribute to Charlotte Bronte also – “All overgrown by cunning moss” (148). She was no less an admirer of George Eliot. Eliot's novel Middlemarch fascinated her: “What do I think of Middlemarch? What do I think of Glory — except that in a few instances this 'mortal has already put on immortality” (Letters Vol.II:506). In the following lines written after George Eliot's death, she pays tribute to her :

Her losses make our Gains ashamed –
 She bore Life's empty Pack
 As gallantly as if the East
 Were swinging at her Back. (1562)

Dickinson even felt biographical affinities with George Eliot :

Now my George Eliot, the gift of belief which her greatness denied her, I trust she received in the childhood of the kingdom of heaven perhaps having no childhood, she lost her way to the early trust and no later came. (Letters Vol.III:700)

Pictures of George Eliot and Elizabeth Barret Browning hung on her bedroom wall.

In fact, Dickinson's various references to women writers clearly demonstrate her identification with them as a group. These English women writers along with several American women novelists and poets provided her the necessary confidence that women too could become serious writers. Thus, she realized in

her personal as well as in her literary life Margaret Fuller's ideal of sisterhood advocated in Woman in the Nineteenth Century. Yet Fuller's sense of reality was a realm where Dickinson would have felt an outsider, a kind of misfit with her passion for abandon and wildness. With the other feminists of the time, Fuller also insisted on the moral perfection of woman :

The especial genius of woman I believe to be electrical in movement, intuitive in function, spiritual in tendency ... I wish women to live first for God's sake". (qtd.in Keller 238)

While Dickinson is amoral and non-didactic, Fuller appears to be opposed to any sort of wildness in woman : "The passions like fire are a bad master; but confine them to the hearth and the altar, and they give life to the social economy" (Keller 239). Fuller expected "Harmony, an obvious order and a self-restraining decorum most from a woman" (Ibid 239). Here Dickinson differs radically from Fuller. Her concern was freedom of the soul exempt from any pre-imposed responsibility. The desire for unsuppressed human nature often informs her poems. She knows that "Civilization spurns the leopard". (492) Her sympathy for the wild leopard shows her implicit identification with the beast, the symbol of her temperamental wildness :

Tawny — her Customs -
 She was Conscious -
 Spotted — her Dun Gown -
 This was the Leopard's nature - Signor-
 Need - a Keeper - frown? (492)

This passion for almost primitive wildness is seen repeatedly in many of her verses, especially in nature poems like "I taste a liquor never brewed" (214), in "We, bee and I-live by Quaffing"- (230) and also in no. 257 where the poet "for glee, / Took Rainbows, as the common way, / And empty Skies / The Eccentricity". The poet of the "Wild Night" who unabashedly speaks of her passionate desire — "Might I but moor — Tonight / In Thee"(249) could hardly

endorse Fuller's advocacy of morality and self-restraint. This would have gone against her credo of the free development of all the potentials of the individual self. Fuller's new woman was conceived too sociologically and morally to be a Dickinson woman. Fuller had her own ideas about the arrival of the perfect woman poet on the American scene. She writes in Woman in the Nineteenth Century :

And will not she soon appear ? — the woman Who shall vindicate their birthright for all Women; who shall teach them what to claim and how to use what they obtain? Shall not her name be for her era Victoria, — yet predictions are rash; she herself must teach us to give her the fitting name. (qtd. in Keller 239)

Fuller was not acquainted with the genius of Dickinson. But we feel that Dickinson would have failed to satisfy her criteria of the perfect woman poet. Karl Keller perceptively observes: "There is hardly a place in Margaret Fuller's reformed world for a female kangaroo" (The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty 239).

However, Dickinson was a feminist in her own way though she did not have any affinity with the dominating feminists of the time. She was not a feminist poet in the social or political sense of the word. She did not actively support the political campaign for women's rights. Her letters never mention the "Woman's Rights" conventions held in Massachusettes between the year 1850 and 1860 when Dickinson was in her twenties. She was, however, keenly aware of the insignificance of woman's life in her contemporary patriarchal society. Martha Dickinson Bianchi spoke about her "latent feminist tendencies" (The life and Letters of Emily Dickinson 26) . Dickinson marked two passages in pencil in her favourite Elizabeth Barret Browning's verse novel "Aurora Leigh". In one of the passages Barret Browning's heroine Aurora Leigh protests against the supposed triviality of a woman's life and activity in her patriarchal social culture:

By the way,
 The works of Women are symbolical,
 We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,
 Producing what? A pair of sleepers, Sir,
 To put on when you are weary-or a stool

 Or else at best a cushion, where you lean
 And sleep and dream of something we are not
 But would be for your sake. Alas, Alas!

(Aurora Leigh I,II 456-65)

That she marked this passage from "Aurora Leigh" is very revealing of her "sensitivity to", as Cheryl Walker observes, "the issues of male condescension and female mediocrity that were raised by the cult of true womanhood" (The Nightingale's Burden 108). She was also acutely aware, as her wife and bride group of poems reveal, of the anguish women felt at the continuous death-like extinction of personality or loss of self in a predominantly patriarchal society. The helplessness and the passivity of a woman's life that "mangle" her from within are subtly revealed in a number of poems. Poem 603 may be taken as a fine instance of this inward mutilation of woman. The toneless, almost mechanic quality of the language points to the pathos of willing submission :

He found my Being — set it up —
 Adjusted it to place —
 Then curved his name-upon it— (603)

In another, we notice a woman in the very process of being dehumanized bit by bit :

He fumbles at your Soul
 As Players at the Keys -

.
 He stuns you by degrees -
 Prepares your brittle Nature
 For the Ethereal Blow · (315)

The sexual assault on women in the name of love or passion is implicitly expressed through these lines. The last two lines are almost explicit :

When winds take Forests in their Paws-
 The universe-is still- (315)

Such poems explain why early modern feminist poets like Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich hailed Dickinson as their nineteenth-century foremother. Dickinson's poetry was central to Rich's feminist ethics and poetics. In the title poem of her volume of poems, Snapshot of a Daughter-in-law (1963), Rich focuses on Dickinson's life and writing to demonstrate how female energies are thwarted by social codes and compulsory domesticity. She imagines Dickinson recreating the world through power of language even when busy with domestic chores:

Reading while waiting
 For the iron to heat,
 Writing, *my life had stood - a loaded Gun-*
 In that Amherst pantry while the Jellies boil and scum
 or, more often,
 Iron eyed and beaked and purposed as a bird,
 Dusting everything on the whatnot everyday of life.

(Snapshot 22)

Feminist critics from the 70s onwards to the final decade of the last century find in Dickinson's poetry myriad possibilities for feminist interpretations. Her poetry as Roland Hagenbüchle observes, has been the "ideal testing ground"

for feminist concern "with the position of woman and with the gendered power relations in contemporary society" (Emily Dickinson Handbook 371).

Dickinson's sense of femininity informs deeply, as modern feminist critics argue, her unusual poetics, and to a great extent, her thematic concerns. For instance, she conceives soul as feminine in a number of poems such as in 303 - "The Soul selects Her Society -", in 306 - "The Soul's superior instants / occur to Her alone" and in 512 - "The Soul has Bandaged moments -". "Exhilaration is within-"(383) is also another remarkable poem that glorifies the self portrayed as feminine :

Exhilaration - is within -
 There can no outer wine -
 So royally intoxicate
 As that diviner Brand
 The Soul achieves - Herself (383)

Truth is also feminine in her imagination as seen in the following example:

How vigorous a Force
 That holds without a Prop -
 Truth stays Herself-and every man
 That trusts Her - boldly up - (780)

Thus, Soul and Truth, the two supreme concerns of her poetry, portrayed as feminine, testify to her insistence on the significance of womanhood in her artistry. Margaret Homans in Women Writers and Poetic Identity (1980) and Crisianne Miller in Emily Dickinson : A Poet's Grammar (1987) explore the impact of her womanhood upon her radical poetics. Homans discovers the cause of Dickinson's disruptive linguistic style and consequent loss of its communicability in her departure from the conventional dualistic structure of language. Homans argues that Dickinson rejects conventional language structure in order to undo the hierarchical relationship between sexes where woman is

generally the other or the object. She offers a detailed analysis of poem 642 to prove her point that Dickinson's "greatest originality lies in her breaking out of the terms of gender altogether" (Women Writers and Poetic Identity 209). The soul is conceived here as a divided self. But the split parts of the self, which are divided but inseparable, remain unlabelled:

Me from Myself to banish -
 had I Art-

 But since Myself – assault Me -

 And since we're mutual Monarch
 How this be
 Except by Abdication -
 Me — of Me? (642)

Homans argues appropriately that this rejection of gender terms or hierarchical terms to define the halves of the self indicates "Dickinson's objection to the conventional language of sexual opposition and her effort to do without it" (ibid 209). Dickinson's poetry, in the process, however, loses communicability for traditional mindset used to dualistic linguistic structure. Even though she was not a proclaimed feminist, Dickinson tried to break away in her art from what French feminist critic Luce Irigaray suggests as hierarchically organized structure of language "that repeats and reinforces both the objectification and the repression of women" ("Women's Exile", Interview with Luce Irigaray in Ideology and Consciousness cited in Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson 116). Miller argues perceptively that "Dickinson writes slanting language to shield her audience from the volcanic power of her speech and understanding" (184). she also argues that "gender is the cohering factor of influence in the development of her poems' compressed, disruptive, doubling style" (Emily Dickinson : A Poet's Grammar 185). In her view, "the disruptions of her style mark her rejection

of the conditions of thought and action in which she has been raised" (A Poet's Grammar 184).

Dickinson, thus, was a feminist in her own undogmatic and individual way even though she did not associate with any contemporary school of feminism. She lived a very quiet unchequered life; yet she was a woman with a fierce sense of individuality and intense desire for personal freedom. She was a woman poet who held herself aloof from her contemporary female literary tradition (the subject of the next chapter). We cannot call her a woman of the nineteenth century in any intrinsic sense of the term. She was different from and ahead of others. She was, we may now justly say, a "sister outsider" (Audre Lorde 45).