

CHAPTER-V
"INTIMATE YET ESTRANGED"

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It is necessary to place Dickinson beside the women poets of her time to understand her uniqueness as a poet. Many Dickinson critics try to view her as an integral part of the contemporary women's literary tradition. Emily Stipes Watts in The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945 (1977) discusses Dickinson's use of images and literary conventions and shows their close parallels in the contemporary women's writing. From this she concludes that Dickinson's poetry "in a variety of ways ... stands firmly within the developing tendencies of American female verse" (125). Cheryl Walker in The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture before 1900 (1982) points to the themes and motifs Dickinson shared with the other women writers of her age. She observes that the motif of "the secret sorrow" dominated contemporary women's poetry and Dickinson gave the secret sorrow an enduring form (89). Joanne Dobson's 1985 dissertation situates Dickinson within the tradition of 19th century women writers and stresses her conformity to the prevalent social norms. Dobson observes that "it would be inspiring but not, I think, wholly realistic, to believe that Dickinson sprang into poetic utterance as a full-fledged and sophisticated feminist /modernist" (37).

Dickinson's letters and frequent prose observations point to her keen interest in the British women writers — Elizabeth Barret Browning, the Brontes and George Eliot — providing her a sort of role-models. Their writings offered her intellectual, artistic and psychological support. However, her contemporaries included a number of American women poets and prose-writers. Alice Cary, Catherine Maria Sedgwick, Elizabeth Oakes Prince Smith, Frances Sargent Osgood and Lydia Huntley Sigourney, to name a few important writers - all lived

and wrote throughout the 1860s and 70s. Three important anthologies of women's verse — Caroline May's The American Female Poets (1848), Rufus Griswold's The Female Poets of America (1848) and Thomas Buchanan Read's The Female Poets of America (1849) - saw publication during the mid-century. So quite a large body of women's verse was available to her when she began her literary career. Her letters testify that she heard about them and also read much of their works as she grew up and entered her youth. Ellen Moers writes on Dickinson's wide-ranging interest in her contemporary women writers :

She read and reread every Anglo-American writer of her time : Helen Hunt Jackson, Lydia Maria Child and Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lady Georgina Fullerton and Dinah Maria Craik and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Rebecca Harding Davis and Harriet Prescott Spofford and Francesca Alexander and Mathilde Mackarness and everything that George Eliot and Mrs. Browning and all the Brontes wrote. (Literary Women: The Great Writers 92)

Conventions and characteristics of contemporary women's poetry were thus familiar to Dickinson, and she employed them in her poetry very often. Major themes of Dickinson's poems such as love, death, nature, God, immortality, these critics suggest, are also the common themes of her contemporary women poets. Her "expressive" techniques such as irony, indirection, ambivalence and other conventional feminine images have also their analogues in the other women writers of the time.

Yet Dickinson towers over them all and appears significantly different from these women writers when we compare her poetry with theirs from the perspective of poetic vision and style. The smooth and predictable women's verse of the time bears very little similarity to her brief and terse lyrics often written in an incomprehensible literary style. Moreover, She adds new substance to the

common themes of poetry and converts them into powerful statements of original insight. Similarly, conventions of the female literary tradition were transmuted into something entirely new by her individual genius.

A brief discussion of the contemporary attitude to women and especially to literary women may help to bring out her uniqueness amongst her female contemporaries. Nineteenth-century American society considered domesticity, religion and morality as women's major concerns. Particularly, religion was considered far more necessary to women than to men: "A woman should be a Christian", writes a father to her daughter (Douglas 44). Women's importance lay in their "moral elevation" (Douglas 44). In Democracy in America (1835), the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville observes: "The singular prosperity and growing strength of [Americans] ought mainly to be attributed to the superiority of their women" (214). This superiority was essentially due to women's morality: "No free communities ever existed without morals and the morals are the work of women" (ibid 196). Catherine Beecher Stowe in "An address to the Christian Women of America" asserts that "woman's great mission is to train ignorant, weak, immature creatures to obey the laws of God, first in the family, then in the school, then in the world (Parker 149). Society expected an ideal woman to be meek and moral, long-suffering and self-effacing, religious and other-worldly. Full emotional and intellectual maturity were considered unnecessary for women. Creative gift was thought to be an essentially male prerogative. Naturally artistic and literary activity were excluded from the female purview. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar quote a poem by Anna Finch to illustrate the notion that a literary woman was something of a freak :

Good breeding, fashion, dancing, dressing, play
 Are the accomplishments we shou'd desire;
 To write, or read or think or to enquire
 We'd cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time

While the dull manage, of a servile house
Is held by some our utmost art and use.

(qtd. in The Madwoman in the Attic 8)

Most of the prominent literary men of the time also held this view. Gilbert and Gubar in Madwoman in the Attic (1979) quote Robert Southey's message to Charlotte Bronte: "Literature is not the business of a woman's life and cannot be" (8). This conservatism of Southey represented the majority attitude to the issue under discussion. Edward Dickinson's five-part article on "Female Education" in a short-lived Amherst newspaper, "New England Inquire", also echoes the same antagonism towards literary women (Wolff 119).

In such a social and intellectual climate, women writers could hardly claim themselves as creative artists with impersonal devotion to art. Afraid to think of themselves as artists, women writers always justified their writing on moral and financial grounds. The desire to be an "instrument of good" (Letters of Life 324), as Lydia Sigourney states in her autobiography, and an acute need for money were the two permitted motives for women's literary activity. Nina Baym observes, "the claim of need for any woman or the rationale of public service motive for the comfortable would sanction female authorship" (Women's Fiction 175). Just as Lydia Sigourney wanted her poems to be moral weapons, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the famous author of Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), also offered moral and financial needs as reasons for her writing career. Calvin Stowe emphasizes in a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe the moral motivations: "God has written it in your book that you must be a literary woman and who are we that we should contend against God?" (Life and Letters 105). Rufus Griswold's preface to The Female Poets of America (1848) also speaks of woman's moral nature as the chief factor behind writing.

So, as a result of social pressures and stereotyped assumptions about female identity, women's writing in the nineteenth century, was intensely moral,

social and didactic in orientation. This accounts for the emergence of a number of women novelists during this period as novel-writing seemed less difficult and socially and morally more useful than poetry writing. Catherine Maria Sedgwick wrote her first novel A New England Tale (1822) with clear moral and religious intentions. Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), Rebecca Harding Davis's Life in the Iron Mills (1861) and Helen Hunt Jackson's Ramona (1884) are also three important fictions in the category of the literature of social advocacy. Stowe's novel is a fierce indictment of slavery; Davis's short story exposes the exploitation of the working class, and Helen Hunt Jackson depicts the cruel eviction of the native Americans from their ancestral land. Women poets, however, were comparatively few. Poetry was a problematic form for women writers. Poetry, specially lyric poetry, seemed incompatible with the socially approved identity of women. It is difficult to suppress subjectivity in poetry as the 'I' in lyric poetry implies a strong assertive self. Poets who wanted to succeed or did achieve success wrote in conformity to societal expectations on moral and social themes. Lydia Sigourney was one of the very popular women poets of the time. Her first volume of poems was titled "Moral Pieces, in Prose and Verse. In Traits of the Aborigines of America (1822), a five-canto poem in blank verse, she pleads for fairness to the oppressed Indians. Sigourney attempted an epic poem "Pocahontas" (1841). Aaron Kramer speaks of it as an "apology and a memorial to these scorned and perished people" (The Prophetic Tradition in American Poetry) (223). Form and content of other successful and publishing women poets such as Francis Osgood (1811-1850), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1815-1852), Helen Hunt Jackson and many others more or less conformed to these social conditioning and wrote a kind of public poetry. Real life emotions of ambition, anger and sexuality were excluded from their portrayal of women characters in poetry. Thus intense moral and didactic responsibility attributed to women made it impossible for them to portray real-life adult women. The conflict and the disruption, the agony of sorrow or the ecstasy of deeply felt

emotions of a real woman must be left out of literary articulation to maintain the ideal image of woman as sweet, perfect, pious, domestic or contented. As a result, cultural stereotypes of womanhood instead of the image of the living individual woman dominated women's literature in general. Forceful original style was discouraged also in favour of sentimental narrative in the novel and familiar rhythm and rhyme in poetry.

When we consider Emily Dickinson as a woman poet against this socio-literary background, she appears radically different. She is, no doubt, to a great extent, a part of the established tradition. However, unlike the majority of women writers of the time, Dickinson had no social, moral or financial spur to creativity. Her poems almost disregard any reference to the great public issues of her era. While slavery, child labour, women's right, etc, were often the major concerns of her colleagues, the personal and eternal rather than the public and temporal inform Dickinson's poetry. Her interest in social and public issues was largely metaphoric. She is more interested in using the linguistic possibilities of her comments on social or public issues instead of using them as facts of social reality. She can write about the "Campaign inscrutable of the interior". Tragic fact of the Civil War provokes a poem of a very different sort:

To fight aloud is very brave
 But gallanter, I know
 Who charge within the bosom
 The cavalry of Woe – (126)

Contemporary women writers found the image of hunger and starvation attractive and useful as symbols of deprivation. Ann Stephens portrays with stark realism the actual pangs of hunger in Fashion and Famine (1854). Rebecca Harding Davis in her Life in the Iron Mills (1861) offers both actual and metaphoric pangs of hunger of the poor. Infact, nineteenth-century women's literature takes up hunger and starvation as major themes. Dickinson, however, employs symbols

of hunger and starvation in a profoundly metaphoric sense pulling them away from their objective social meanings. Movement of her images is from the external world to the world of the individual self. Poem no. 579 speaks metaphorically of the hunger for love :

I had been hungry, all the Years
 My Noon had Come – to – dine –
 I trembling drew the Table near –
 And touched the Curious Wine – (579)

There are, however, a few references to social or public issues in some of Dickinson's letters. But they highlight her tendency to give the topic some personal dimension, ignoring their social aspect. She writes to Susan Gilbert in Baltimore where a convention of the Whig party was being held at the time:

... Why cant [sic] I be a Delegate to the great Whig Convention?
 - dont [sic] I know all about Daniel Webster, and the Tarrif, and
 the Law? Then, Sushi I could see you, during a pause in the
 session - (Letters Vol.I:212)

Her letter to Elizabeth Holland in August 1881 also manifests this tendency: "When I look in the Morning Paper to see how the president is, I know you are looking too ... (Letters Vol. III :706).

Dickinson's unconcern with moral or public issues makes her reference to them something very personal. This lack of any social or didactic concern is a quality that separates her from her contemporaries. Her writing at the best reveals her generalized philosophical and psychological insights into human nature. A poem like the one quoted below clearly illustrates this tendency :

It's such a little thing to weep
 So short a thing to Sigh
 And yet – by Trades – the size of these
 We men and Women die ! (189)

Her lack of moral concern comes out clearly once contrasted with Helen Hunt Jackson who was a powerful poet of her time. Jackson's poems on nature are quite interesting. But Jackson follows the conventional assumptions about nature. Her poem "March" evokes a realistic image of the season :

Beneath the Sheltering walls the thin snow clings –
 Dead Winter's skeleton, left bleaching, white,
 Disjointed, crumbling, on unfriendly fields. (Verses 149)

However, the poem ends with the usual conventional moralizing about the healing influence of nature as Jackson follows didactic tendencies usual among women poets of her era :

Ah, March ! We know thou art
 Kindhearted, spite of ugly looks and threats,
 And, out of sight, art nursing April's violets !

The received image of nature in the closing lines negates the realistic vision of the opening. In Dickinson, however, nature is never spiritualized. She rather emphasizes its mystery, its incomprehensibility and its remoteness from man. A case in point is her poem on the moon. The moon is like a guillotined head or a stemless flower. It is hard to find such a startling image in the whole range of contemporary American women's poetry. She has no concern for the mysteries of "life-Death-and Afterwards" that "harass" human beings (629). Such poems illustrate how sharply Dickinson diverges from the contemporary women poets.

What makes Dickinson almost an outsider to the women's literary tradition is her penchant for exploring the significance of women's personal experience. Self-expression was her only creative imperative. Many of her poems directly violate the taboo on the uninhibited presentation of a woman's feeling by exploring the hidden depths of her mind. This penetrating subjectivity invests her work with a rare depth and fascination. The female persona in Dickinson's poetry is very often fierce in her self expression. She often defines herself through

defiance and deviation. She is often a "Debauchee of the Dew-" (214), a little carefree "Tippler" leaning against the sun (214), an angry "leopard" (492) and also a passionate woman wishing the luxury of the "Wild Nights" (249). Indeed the poem revels in expressing adult female sexuality :

Wild Nights-Wild Nights !
 were I with thee
 Wild Nights should be
 Our Luxury ! (249)

The "I" in Dickinson's poem is often an apostate who considers the conventional heaven a "House of Suppositions" (696). Her female persona is often a 'Queen', an independent woman with a "Will to choose or reject" (508) or an agonized soul who felt a "funeral in the brain" (280). These Dickinsonian women stand in direct opposition to the stereotyped images of conventional woman.

However, Emily Dickinson had to pay much to maintain her artistic integrity. With barely a handful of poems published anonymously during her life time and known only to a few half-appreciative friends and family, she had no recognition as a poet. Her refusal to publish cannot be explained away as a natural desire for privacy and reticence common among nineteenth-century women. However much her aversion to the publication of her poems and notwithstanding her letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson projecting herself as a shy genius, Higginson's failure to appreciate the poems made her realize the impossibility of winning contemporary recognition. His failure to evaluate her poetry led her to renounce her ambition to be a published poet. She realised that the socially accepted subject-matter and undemanding language were the passport to publication and popular success. She accepted her "Barefoot" rank of a private poet perhaps hoping for a favourable future "Tribunal". Refusal to compromise enabled her to write her intensely personal poems unhindered by social proscriptions. However, it alienated her from her peers and destined her to a

"nobody" existence during her life-time.

Dickinson's individuality comes through when we analyse her use of the common conventions in contemporary women's poetry. In conformity to the prevailing socio-cultural norms, women's literature shows extensive use of female persona as little girls, daisy, mouse, wife/bride, etc., images that reinforced the social view about women as "Nobody". Nina Baym (Women's Fiction), Barbara Mossberg (When the Writer is a Daughter) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (The Mad woman in the Attic) have dealt with these conventions and their implication and appeal to the contemporary readers. The use of these conventions, as it appears from their observations, arose from the proscription on the articulation of mature and complex experience of the real life individual women. Society approved of literary depiction of women as small, timid and perpetually dependent. Women in literature must not be shown in their full physical and intellectual maturity. These social expectations put the women poets in a very disadvantageous position. This rigid stereotyping of women in literature severely limited the intellectual and aesthetic excellence of their art. However, most women writers conformed to the conventional mode of expression that reinforced the socially approved perception about women. As a result, little girl persona dominated women's fiction and poetry. Choice of the little girl protagonist allowed women writers to avoid anxieties about the portrayal of adult female ambition and female sexuality.

Observation of these conventions in the available literature shows that it has two distinct aspects : convention of the good little girl and the convention of the naughty little girl. Barbara Mossberg calls them daughter persona. For her, this little girl image has a dual aspect: "the dutiful daughter and the rebellious daughter" (When a Writer is a Daughter 198). The "dutiful daughter" or the good little girl was an expression of feminine obedience and perfection, and the "rebellious daughter" represented female anger and ambition. Little Montgomery in Susan Warner's The Wide Wide World (1850) and Topsy, the slave-child in Uncle

Tom's Cabin represent this naughty girl or "rebellious daughter" persona. Through these naughty girl figures women writers freely expressed woman's anger and rebelliousness otherwise proscribed from articulation.

Examples of the good little girl protagonist model abound in contemporary women's prose and poetry. Mara in Stowe's The Pearl of Orr's Island (1862) and Eva in Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) are two characteristic examples. Fleda in Susan Warner's Queechy (1852) is another representative example of this dutiful daughter convention of the women's literature. In poetry, Elizabeth Oakes Smith's saintly Eva in ^{The} Sinless Child (1834) represents the model-figure of the saintly little girl:

Her mother said that Eva's lips
 Had never falsehood known;
 No angry words had ever, marred
 The music of their tone.
 And truth spoke out in every line
 Of her fair, tranquil face.
 Where love and peace, twin-dwelling pair,
 Had found a resting place.

The popular concept of women's spiritual power compensating for their lack of real power in society informs these lines. This exemplary girl persona of the female literary tradition explicitly reinforces society's concept of female morality and selfless goodness. Interestingly enough, all these model girl figures die sooner or later. Joanne Dobson justly observes that death as the final destiny of all these model girls perhaps suggests the incompatibility of such ideals with the reality of adult womanhood: "The inevitable end of all this goodness and obedience is the eschewal of adulthood by an early death or by permanent ladylike 'invisibility'" (Dobson, "Emily Dickinson and Mid-Nineteenth Century American Women Writers" 100).

Whether she liked them or not, Dickinson was aware of these conventions popular in women's poetry. She writes to Susan Dickinson in one of her letters: "I have just read three little books, not great, not thrilling-- but sweet and true ... pure little lives - loving God, and their parents, and obeying the laws of the land;- yet read, if you meet them, Sushi, for they will do one good" (Letters Vol.I: 195). She was interested in them and employed many of these conventional female personae such as daisy, child, mouse, wife / bride etc. in her verse. Very often, her poems employ these images of women as subtle ironic comments on those stereotyped images. This ambivalence and complexity is particularly felt in Dickinson's use of little girl and wife/bride images in a number of poems.

Before we begin to study her handling of these popular conventions, it will be interesting to observe that there may be other complex psychological and sociological reasons for their presence in Dickinson's poetry. A close look at her life and letters shows her persistent interest in childhood. She often wished in her letters that she could return to childhood. She praised one friend for being "more of a woman than I am, for I love so to be a child" (Sewall, Life Vol.II 332). At twenty-one, "she longed "to ramble away as children, [with Sue] among the woods and forget these many years, and those sorrowing cares, and each become a child again" (Sewall, Life Vol.II: 332). To her brother she writes: "I wish we were always children" (Sewall, Life Vol.II: 332). She believed sincerely that "the angel begins in the morning in every human life" (Life Vol.II: 333). Sewall explains this fascination with childhood as emerging from her love of the freshness and freedom of childhood. It was her sincere belief that "The child's faith is new". It is "Wide Like the Sunrise / on fresh Eyes--" (637).

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, however, offer a contrary view that Dickinson's keen desire for a permanent childhood arose out of her wish to avoid that "concept of womanliness which required self-abnegating renunciation" (The Madwoman in the Attic 590). They argue that Dickinson perhaps felt that to gain female adulthood in her society meant a renunciation of her vocation as an

artist and complete loss of individuality. So she preferred to remain in her father's house "a childlike nobody" instead of becoming a wifely nobody in a husband's house (Madwoman 591).

Accordingly, the poetic convention of the child persona suited Dickinson. Her strongest poems dramatize childhood as their distinguishing quality. She employed both the good and the bad persona of the little girl/daughter convention in a number of poems (Nos.70, 248, 520, 613, 874, 1201 and some others). Her little girls, like similar figures in contemporary women's poetry, are frequently wretched, bullied and neglected by cruel guardians and relatives. She often goes far beyond other literary women of her time in portraying the pathos of their situation. So the little girl in poem 874 imagines that "they won't frown" upon her or 'tease' her after her death :

Then They will hasten to the Door
To call the little Girl
Who cannot thank Them for the Ice
That filled the lipping full. (874)

Her little girl figures, deprived of the happiness of love, often suggest the powerlessness of women. The girl child in 613, for instance, resents society's repressive attempt to make her still:

They shut me up in Prose –
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet –
Because they liked me "still"– (613)

Along with this dutiful or obedient little girl, coexists the other persona of the naughty or rebellious daughter. These pictures constitute Dickinson's subtle and ironical perspective on the situations. The little girl in 1201 "pull" her "Stockings off" and wades in water "For the Disobedience' Sake". The poet invests her with an independence of will not permitted by society. The girl remains

unsubmissive up to the end and cites evidence from the Bible for doing so:

Boy that lived for "or'ter"
 Went to Heaven perhaps at Death
 And perhaps he didn't
 Moses wasn't fairly used –
 Ananias wasn't – (1201)

Through these protesting little girls, Dickinson often attacks orthodox religion. The child in poem no. 376 pleads for mercy. But her prayer only exposes the cruel indifference of God. An innocent, curious child enquires in poem no.215: "What is paradise?" So use of the little girl figure places Dickinson within her contemporary female literary culture as Cheryl Walker, Emily Watts Stipes and more recently Barton Levy St. Armand and Joanne Dobson suggest. But the complex and often rebellious portrayals point to her distinctiveness rubbing off on the conventions. Beneath their conforming surface, these poems are often sly, mocking, often daringly blasphemous. Her little girl personae are not exactly identical with the conventional little maids in contemporary women's literature. These little girl figures allowed her "stylistic eccentricities" also. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note this and write: "Child mask enabled her to write a great deal of innovative poetry full of grammatical mistakes and stylistic eccentricities such as only a mad child could write" (Madwoman 591).

Woman as wife in a number of poems also links Dickinson with her contemporary women poets. Woman as wife was a popular figure in women's literature of the time. Dickinson also uses this figure in a number of poems. Often she uses her also as a multifaceted symbol. Her wife persona far transcends the conventionality and limitations of the image in contemporary women's literature. The wife speaker in poem 199 raptures over her married state as it offers her a sense of power and identity unavailable to the single woman: "I am 'Czar'- I'm 'woman' now-". But the stereotyped ideas are subtly undermined in

the second stanza where the word "Eclipse" refers to the lack of consciousness and the invisibility of existence demanded of a wife in her society :

How odd the Girl's life looks
 Behind this soft Eclipse –
 I think that Earth feels so
 To folks in Heaven – now –

The safety and comforts of marriage relate ultimately to the safety of heaven. A subtle reading of the lines helps us to see that Dickinson posits life as the price for this safety and security. The conventional elation of the first line evaporates completely when at the end the speaker-wife compares her present state with her past girlhood : "Why compare/I am "Wife"! stop there!". The persona of the wife in poem no. 732 apparently conforms to the social expectation by being timid and submissive and gives up her own worth as mere "playthings" :

She rose to His Requirement–dropt
 The Playthings of Her Life
 To take the honorable Work
 Of Woman, and of Wife– (732)

She extols the "honorable Work of Woman and of Wife". But a perceptive reader keenly feels the quiet sorrow of the wife who needs to relinquish all her potential, her "Amplitude" and "Awe" in uncomplaining silence. A wife's capacity and worth lay "unmentioned" and unrecognised. Poem no. 461 beginning with the line "A wife at day break I shall be" equates the consummation of marriage with death: "Saviour, I have seen thy face before". Christ, Death and husband all converge on the same person, and the marriage experience reduces to the experience of death. The subtle yet forceful tone of irony actually subverts the concept of wifely submission and passivity. The poems beginning with the lines "He found my being-set it up" (603) and "He fumbles at your Soul" (315) also may be interpreted as ironical presentations of the wife's predicament. The

cold and almost brutal language despite surface passivity exposes tellingly how women are mutilated in the name of love. Dickinson quietly shatters the myth of the "ideal woman" also that conceals the real woman. The "Charm" of a woman supposedly lies in her invisibility :

A Charm invests a face
Imperfectly beheld –
The Lady dare not lift her Veil
For fear it be dispelled – (421)

The woman in the poem thus "dare not lift her veil", fearing "lest Interview-annual a want / That Image - satisfies-". Evidently, Dickinson uses the female poetic subjects of her day, but she subtly exposes the myth of true womanhood as exemplified by the conventional wife figures. Perhaps she suggests that woman's life in the accepted mode is actually another name for death.

Dickinson also shares with other women writers of her time some common themes such as secret sorrow, ambivalence to power, etc. (Cheryl Walker 90). But she treats these themes in a very individual way that makes her poems highly characteristic. For instance, Elizabeth Oakes Smith tells us in her poem "The Poet" how the woman poet writes "Lays that make a mighty gladness" out of the hidden "thorn" beneath her "breast" in spite of all their "mournful sadness" (qtd. in Walker 89). Lydia Sigourney also writes about "the ever pointed thorn hidden "in secret" in women's "breast" (ibid 89). Walker also cites from Lucy Hooper's verse revealing this attraction of the secret sorrow :

Oh, how much
The world will envy those whose hearts are filled
With secret and unchanging grief, if fame
Or outwards splendour gilds them! (qtd. in Walker 90)

Dickinson's poem on this theme of secret sorrow offers a very different reading experience revealing a tough intelligence:

Best grief is Tongueless - before He'll tell-
 Burn Him in the Public Square –
 His ashes - will
 Possibly if they refuse -How then know-
 Since a Rack couldn't coax a syllable – now. (793)

Dickinson's spider poems also testify to this individual treatment of conventional themes. The spider as a moral symbol of perseverance, industry and rationality was a popular subject in 19th-century religio-cultural thought (Emily Dickinson and Her Culture 35). Lydia Sigourney's conventional treatment of the spider moralizes on the spider's "untiring skill" and "energy of will" with which she "builds her bower". The spider is an example of reason and courage:

Toiling thro' the gloomiest shade
 Gathereth Vigour from defeat -
 Child of Reason - deign to see
 what an insect Teacheth thee.

(qtd. in Emily Dickinson and Her Culture 32).

Dickinson has written three spider poems; none of them show least didactic trace usual in contemporary poetry. She portrays the spider as an "artist" and as a "Neglected Genius"(1275), perhaps a counterpart of her own isolated and unappreciated poetic self. The emblem of the spider artist in 605 suggests her delight in her art. More importantly she also suggests her stoicism at the prospect of her art being swept away by time's broom just as the gossamer net of the spider seems mere "sophistries" against the dark reality of the housewife's broom:

An Hour to rear supreme
 His Continents of Light-
 Then dangle from the Housewife's Broom-
 His Boundaries - forgot – (605)

Another spider poem links her alienated artistic self with the spider artist "who sewed at Night/without a light /Upon an Arc of White" (1138). Like the spider's net, her art is also mysterious. We have to judge it by "physiognomy", the outside features and understand its meaning each according to our peculiar "Light". This profundity of vision marks her out from her contemporaries.

Dickinson's bird poems also demonstrate her superiority to the contemporary women poets. Identification with the song-bird in a sentimental mode was the socially approved feminine subject in the nineteenth century. Felicia Heman's and Elizabeth Oakes Smith's poems on the topic serve as perfect examples. In Heman's "The Wings of the Dove", bird symbolizes freedom :

Oh for thy wings, thou Dove!
 Now sailing by with sunshine on thy breast;
 That borne like thee above,
 I too might flee away, and be at rest!

The poem continues sentimentalising the poet's desires and fears :

Wild wish, and longing vain,

.
 My soul is bound and held-I may not flee. (qtd.in Walker 46).

Elizabeth Oakes Smith's "An Incident" also follows this predictable sentimental mode. The bird in the poem as Walker argues "first suggests power through the speaker's identification with freedom, and then powerlessness through the rejection of this identification" (Walker 47). The poet laments in a sentimental fashion:

O noble bird ! why didst thou loose for me
 Thy eagle plume ? Still unessayed, unknown
 Must be that pathway fearless winged by thee;
 I ask it not, no lofty flight be mine,
 I would not soar like thee, in loneliness to pine. (qtd. in Walker 47)

Dickinson's bird-poems, however, defy the usual assumption that a woman's poem about a bird is necessarily sentimental. Birds in her verse denote a wide range of connotations and hardly make sentimental identification with the poet's feminine self. For instance, "A bird came down the Walk" (328) demonstrates her surprisingly objective portrayal of natural objects. The bird, as the poet watches it, "bit an Anglemorm in halves / And ate the fellow, raw". Then it "drank a Dew from a convenient Grass – / And then hopped sidewise to the Wall / to let a Beetle pass –". This objective and minute descriptive style stands far remote from Heman's or Oakes Smith's sentimental self-identification. The poem ends with rare artistry in the final stanza depicting how the bird flies away :

And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home –
Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam– . . .

Instead of indulging in usual self-pity, Dickinson often fuses objective portrayal with impersonal reflection as in "Upon his saddle sprung a Bird" (1600). The bird in the poem "crossed a thousand Trees", sat on a "Fence" and then "squandered" his song upon the "Universe". Her musings on the birdsong at dawn in 783 also offer a rewarding reading experience. The first three stanzas describe the gradual increase of the birds' voices with the advancing dawn :

I could not count their Force –
Their Voices did expend
As Brook by Brook bestows itself
To multiply the Pond. (783)

Fourth stanza takes us to reflection from the description. The poet assumes that the music of the bird at dawn is a "Miracle" and is "independent ecstasy / of Deity and Men". The bobolink in 755 is a symbol of undying human spirit in spite of all pain and suffering. The bird goes on singing even if the only tree which is "His spacious Future" and "Best Horizon" is "Clove to the Root" by the

"Farmer". Dickinson's bird poems thus transcend the cloying sweetness or sentimentality of contemporary treatment generally noticed in published women's poetry of the time. She writes on the theme in her individual way unhindered by gender assumptions.

Dickinson is also far ahead of her generation in her stunning psychological insight into the suffering human psyche. The poem "I felt a funeral in my Brain" serves as a classic example. With cool detachment, she analyses the terrible sense of near madness, her alienated psychic experiences through a surreal image of a corpse conscious of its funeral. Here we have all the contemporary conventions of the funeral service; mourners are "seated", service begins, and the dead body is put in the box: "Mourners to and fro/kept trading - trading - till it seemed ..." . But the convention is shattered as no feeling of sublimity, no divine expectation is felt in the final stanza. Instead, there is a total and terrible alienation, and a collapse into the unknown abyss of death:

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then (280)

The poem seems to work on two levels. On the surface, this is a grotesque description of the terrible loneliness of a dying person thrown into fearful oblivion of death and an ironic commentary on conventional poetry on the dead. On a second level, the poem is a penetrating analysis of a mind verging on madness. Death here serves as a metaphor for madness. Such poems place her far apart from the conventional women poets of the time given over to sentimentalities and pieties.

Dickinson's radical language use is now-a-days a commonplace of Dickinson scholarship. Daring linguistic innovations, violations of normal grammatical structure, extremely unconventional use of dash and ellipsis and

many other novel stylistic features impart to her art an unprecedented originality. David Porter in Modern Idiom has shown in detail how Dickinson makes her poems complex and extraordinary beside the standard contemporary verse written by women. Conformity to cultural and literary conventions made the language of the women poets familiar and undemanding. Porter quotes a few lines from a contemporary woman poet Sara Clark published in Springfield Republican:

I leave thee, love; in vain hast thou
 The God of life implored;
 My clinging soul is torn from thine,
 My faithful my adored! . . . (qtd. in Porter 76)

Richard Sewall also includes in his biography of Dickinson some poems by contemporary women poets as examples of popular poetry. A few lines from a poem titled "The Withered Daisies" published in the Springfield Republican on February 19, 1859 also illustrate amply how Dickinson's poems differ radically from such conventional poems :

She flitted like a sunbeam bright
 Around our cottage door;
 Her footsteps, as a fairy's light,
 Made music on the floor.
 On every flower of wood or glade
 She lavished childish praises,
 She loved all things the Lord has made,
 But most she loved the Daisies. (qtd. in Sewall Vol. II:744)

Dickinson's poems stand poles apart from such conventional poems. Porter observes appropriately that "Dickinson's quick alien poems with their aggressive language present a radically different reading experience" (Modern Idiom 76). Indeed, she surprises us with her unexpected and often

shocking language use in poem after poem. The world, she imagines, as "Republic of Delight" (1107); "Eternity's vast pocket gets "picked" in her poem. Summer "troubles", and "Eggs fly off in Music" (956). Richard Sewall finds her mastery over words almost Shakespearean : "I would add that she not only learned from Shakespeare ... but achieved comparable results" (Sewall, Life 719). Harold Bloom also in his scholarly work Western Canon (1994) places Dickinson beside Shakespeare (291). Cheryl Walker in The Nightingale's Burden shows how Dickinson's unconventional language use in "I had not minded – Wall–" (398) violates usual expectations of the reader and transforms a poem on the common womanly theme of forbidden love into a sort of surrealist modern poem (Walker 113-15).

Dickinson's stylistic originality is best seen in her intensely abstract and often obscure images. Porter elaborately explores how her unique attitude to experience produces strangely abstract images like "Dots on a disc of Snow" (216), or "Dome of Abyss" (291), or "Furrow on the Glow" (1086), the "Germ of Alibi" (1298) etc. Archibald Macleish thus writes about her strange images:

"Amethyst remembrance", "Polar expiation". Neither can be brought into focus by the muscles of the eye. The "blue and gold mistake" of Indian summer seems to exist somewhere in the visible ... who can describe the graphic shape of 'that white sustenance/despair'? And yet all of these present themselves as images, do they not?-act as images? (Richard Sewall, Emily Dickinson:152)

These images break the utmost limit of language to convey her mysterious sense of reality and reveal her striking originality.

Dickinson's exclusive choice of the lyric genre also marks her distinctiveness. Lyric was a problematic genre for 19th century women writers. Self-expression, an inherent characteristic of lyric poetry, was opposed by the accepted code of femininity. Lyric poetry requires, as we all know, a strong and assertive self. It

was very difficult for 19th century women poets to go beyond the expression of socially approved female feelings and explore true subjectivity. Women writers of the time, therefore, mostly chose novel-writing. The novel allows the "self-effacing" withdrawal that society fosters in women. Most of the practising women poets of the time took to novel and other literary forms because of the inimical socio-cultural condition. Helen Hunt Jackson, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Alice Cary and many others were successful novelists. In fact, nineteenth century saw the rise of the novel to the status of the dominating genre. Perhaps keeping this in mind, Dickinson insisted that the speakers in her poems are not to be treated as real-life persons. But whatever her meaning, unlike others, she occupied herself exclusively with lyric poetry and remained true to the expression of authentic personal feelings. She renounced the prospect of publication and fame and thereby evaded the social proscription on the expression of female subjectivity. She never wrote an extended narrative poem or any novel or prose romance despite its obvious advantages for a literary woman. This certainly sets her apart from most of the familiar women artists of the time and even from her adored models like Elizabeth Barret Browning. Barret Browning perhaps tried to obviate all injunction and prohibition by inserting lyric outbursts about women's predicament within the narrative framework of Aurora Leigh (1858). May be, she made a reasonable compromise between self-assertion and submission in her effort to be successful as a woman writer in the nineteenth century. But Dickinson clung to the lyric poetry as the only medium of literary expression despite her subaltern status as a woman poet. This determination underlines her uniqueness as a woman poet. Sandra Gilbert says in this context : "Emily Dickinson's implicit rejection of Barret Browning's compromise indicates just how 'mad' and 'unworldly' the 'Myth of Amherst' was" (Madwoman 575). Arguing on this point, Gilbert and Gubar also draw attention to the "magnitude of the poetic self-creation" Emily Dickinson achieved through working in the lyric genre that has been "traditionally the most satanically

assertive, daring, and therefore precarious of literary modes for women" (Mad woman 582).