Chapter VI

Conclusion

The study of Emily Dickinson’s poems has revealed the woman poet not only as the representative woman’s voice of the nineteenth century but also as a formidable literary figure of the female literary tradition. Her poetry reflects a unique female creative voice that expresses woman’s issues with such ingenuity that has never been manifested earlier in women writers’ works before her times. Dickinson explores woman’s viewpoint in her poems questioning and challenging society’s cultural and religious definitions that repress woman. Thus, her poems exhibit the feminist strand before feminism and pave the way of the flowering of feminism in the literary works of great modern women writers like Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath and Marianne Moore who have successfully carved a distinctive genre of female writing in twentieth century. The feminist views of woman’s subjugation are perceived in her poems. Therefore, many feminist critics and scholars have regarded Dickinson as an invaluable institution in woman’s writing and explored her poems as an integral part of feminist studies.

The feminist perspective explored in Emily Dickinson’s poetry as “the woman’s voice” is also a spirited, articulate voice that revolutionizes the conventional conception of women’s writing and revises patriarchal hierarchies and polarization in socio-cultural and literary spheres. The woman’s voice challenges and topples all accepted male-constructed ideologies, standards and institutions that have so far exploited women. Breaking the enforced silence, Dickinson’s poetry articulates the woman’s
voice, which discusses, comments and rebels against the repression of the female self. Such a woman’s voice from the nineteenth century lends a new dimension of women’s writing.

The concluding chapter recapitulates the arguments of the preceding chapters to focus on Dickinson’s poetry as the articulation of the woman’s voice. Accordingly, the chapter summarizes Dickinson’s ideas on woman’s female self, marriage, sex, religion and art in her poems and analyzes the conclusions arrived at. The chapter also examines the poet’s unique literary style that effectively brings out her radical ideas on gender and society. Finally, the research highlights a few fascinating dimensions of Dickinson’s poetry unraveled during the course of this study.

The first chapter, “Introduction”, commenced with Emily Dickinson’s biographical and poetic life. Her selected poems were studied in relation to both American and British women writers of her time. However, it is with the British writers she has been identified as they have defied “the many-faceted glass coffins of the patriarchal texts”, expanded the cultural definitions of woman’s writing to indefinite horizons, and also created a distinctive female literary tradition. Akin to these writers’ works, Dickinson’s poems undermine/challenge paternal authority in literary art with her unconventional poetic style and content.

The chapter has thrown a glimpse of Dickinson’s poems, which articulate woman’s issues like female discrimination, woman’s repression and woman’s struggle for self-definition and autonomy in patriarchal culture. It also highlights Dickinson’s personal struggle as a woman and as a woman
writer in the New England puritanical patriarchal society. Her reclusive life as a spinster that refuted publicity and fame was analyzed as an expression of her identity crisis. This pertains to her decision to refrain from the publication of her poems to retain her intrinsic original poetic style, a decision that reflects the fight for survival as a woman writer. Her poetry has been studied as the poet’s biography describing her life vacillating in a painful “double bind” where on the one hand she yearns for recognition as a woman poet and on the other, she suffers from the anxiety of authorship.

The method of approach of the proposed research, views of selected feminist criticisms on Emily Dickinson’s poetry and the organization of the thesis into chapters were finally appraised in order to provide feminist interpretation of her poems.

The second chapter, “Writing the Female Self” explored Dickinson’s poems as the act of writing the female self. Accordingly, it analyzed the emergence of the female self, challenging the repressive gender determined societal roles and norms inscribed upon woman in favor of a fulfilling autonomous self-created life in poetry. It highlighted her renunciation of the male-centric puritanical world and her entrance as a recluse poet to the exclusive male domain of intellectual and artistic activities and assertion of the female self and sexuality that are treated as “dark” and taboo.

The chapter further studied Dickinson’s poems as a challenge to the dominant androcentric discourse of poetry to carve out a literary discourse of the private female self. In this regard, the poet’s leanings to Transcendentalism were dealt with. In relation to the female discourse, the chapter also discussed
Dickinson’s poetic expression of the repressed sexual self through an exploration of her poet personae, glorifying the female body by drawing a parallel with nature to express its greatness. Dickinson’s homoerotic and autoerotic poetry centered on woman were also examined in order to underline female sexuality and female creativity as autonomous and powerful alternatives in literary discourse. Phallocentric hierarchies and discourses that eulogize male power and aggressiveness of male creativity have been replaced by paradoxical clitorocentricism. Female sexual imagery representing the clitoris and vagina were discussed at length to view them as representations of affirmation of the repressed female self.

The chapter also examined in Dickinson’s poetry the evolution of an autonomous female self as seen below:

I’m ceded – I’ve stopped being Theirs –

The name They dropped upon my face

..................................................

But this time – Adequate – Erect,

With Will to choose – or to reject, (508, 1-2, 17-18)

Images in Dickinson’s poems such as the fiery volcano and the loaded gun were also explored in the chapter as an indication of the emergence of the aggressive female self, which threatens to explode its repressed fiery self and destroy the repressive patriarchal order as seen in the lines below:

A still – Volcano – Life –
Whose hissing Corals part – and shut –

And Cities- ooze away – (601, 1, 15-16)

The subversive female fury stands for the female self, the writing and the woman. This fiery female self is also evident in the ensuing chapter, “View of Religion”.

The third chapter, “View of Religion” studied Dickinson’s poems as a refutation of nineteenth century Calvinist religion that subjugates woman. In this context, the chapter examined Dickinson’s disagreement with the spirit of puritanical fervor that swept New England and her denial of conventional faith and church:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –

I keep it, staying at Home – (324, 1-2)

Her poems were then evaluated as challenges of certain conventional religious notions such as belief in death and after life, the sacrosanct identity of the Bible, the Christian Trinitarian theology of the God or Father – Son – Logos, hierarchical phallogocentrism and exclusionary patriarchal theology. The chapter discussed in her poems the ills of repressive orthodoxy that cause painful sufferings, alienation, injustice and expulsion of woman and woman poet. This is observed in the poem below:

I’m banished – now – you know it –

How foreign that can be –
You’ll know – Sir – when the Savior’s face

Turns so – away from you – (256, 10-13)

The chapter also examined Dickinson’s refutation of puritanical religion that regarded God as an omnipotent male sovereign. Through her poems, she contests patriarchal claims that subjugate woman by her bold choices and her wielding power of words as a female poet, which is expressed in the poem below:

Sweet Mountains – Ye tell Me no lie –

..........................................................

My Strong Madonnas – Cherish still –

The Wayward Nun – beneath the Hill –

Whose service – is to You –

Her latest Worship – (722, 1, 7-10)

Further, the chapter analyzed the presence of a bold feminist approach in Dickinson’s poems such as the irreligious union of the spiritual and the erotic; her paralleling of woman and Christ; transformation of negative femininity into positive energy; her philosophy based on inclusion. Such expressions of the female poet signify the emergence of the woman’s voice that voices protest against conventional puritanical orthodoxy. Through her poetry, Dickinson seeks a divinity for transcendence from the exclusionary, repressive religion to secure an inviolate territory where a feminine divine order celebrates the majesty of woman:
There is another sky,

Ever serene and fair, (2, 1-2)

Dickinson’s revolutionary zeal perceived in her view on religion can also be seen in her treatment of marriage and sex in the next chapter.

The fourth chapter, “Marriage and Sex” commenced with the discussion of general feminist opinions on the subject. Marriage and sex were seen as the arena for men’s exploitation of woman. The chapter reflected on Dickinson’s choice of spinsterhood as an expression of deliberate refutation. The chapter examined the different issues of marriage manifested in Dickinson’s poems and these are as follows: the subordinate status of woman after marriage and her social vulnerability; woman’s loss of choice; autonomy and self-definition; denial to woman of higher intellectual and artistic pursuits of life. Dickinson expresses her anguish at the one-sided suffering of woman as “wife forgotten” pining for the militant man that “scorches them, scathes them” (L93). Her poems of marriage symbolizing death-in-life and life-in-death were discussed in the chapter. This relates to the woman’s hollow status of marriage as death-like and her compromising of her talents and existence for an insipid subservient wifehood lost in the drudgery of domestic slavery.

The chapter also explored in Dickinson’s poetry some interesting dimensions and points of view surfacing from many of her poems. Some poems are about the unsung woman in domestic reserves; some discuss marriage as power play; discouragement of female bonding in marriage; marriage as the cause of woman’s loss of self-esteem and her psychological
trauma; loveless marriage in the nineteenth century domestic household. Thus, her poems depict the “abject ontology” of the lowly housewife. (Kirkby 70).

Lastly, the chapter focused on the issues of sex that are apparent in Emily Dickinson’s poetry. These issues highlighted the sexual repressions and violations woman suffered in the patriarchal culture. Dickinson’s poem “Wild Nights – Wild Nights!” (294), expresses the woman’s desire for sexual gratification by unleashing fabricated taboos that repress her.

Her homoerotic poems were also explored in the chapter as the assertion of female sexuality and female bonding. The homoerotic mode discredits phallocentrism that subjugates female sexuality. Dickinson empowers the repressed female sexuality of woman, through her paradoxical assertion of clitorocentrism. Homosexual relationship was examined in terms of female bonding that creates nurturance and equanimity as opposed to dominance and oppression characterized by heterosexual relationship.

The chapter explored the secret and silent sufferings of woman due to sexual violence. Other poignant issues discussed in Dickinson’s sexual poems were violation of female sexuality through forced sex or rape and sexual constraints on female sexuality.

In her poems, Dickinson not only portrays the physical aspect of sexual violation on woman but also explores the excruciating psychological and emotional pain that a woman’s soul suffers in the brutal act of forced sex or rape. This is evident in her poem, “He fumbles at your Soul”:

He fumbles at your Soul
Deals – One – imperial – Thunderbolt –

That scalps your naked Soul – (315, 1, 11-12)

In this regard, the chapter highlighted Dickinson’s portrayal of the cruel indifference of the patriarchal society towards the female rape victim. Thus, the female soul suffers the horrors of rape again (though psychologically) as her rights to secure justice are violated and forced to endure it in silence: “The Horror welcomes her, again, / These, are not brayed of Tongue” (512, 23-24).

The assault on female sexuality often leads women to frustration. The constraints on her sexuality even induce the poet persona to thoughts of mutilation of her gender marked body:

Rearrange a “Wife’s” affection!

When they dislocate my Brain!

Amputate my freckled Bosom!

Make me bearded like a man! (1737, 1-4)

The fifth chapter, “Woman as Writer” studied Emily Dickinson as a woman writer both in conventional and modern terms. In this respect, both biographical criticisms on Emily Dickinson and prominent feminist literary opinions were examined. Accordingly, the following topics surfaced for discussion: the impact of women writers on Emily Dickinson, particularly the British women writers who led to the “Conversion of Mind” of Emily Dickinson as a woman poet; Dickinson’s poetry as different from her
American female contemporaries; Dickinson’s contribution as a woman writer. In this context, special mention was made of Elizabeth Barrett Browning whose verse novel “Aurora Leigh” inspired her to outgrow from the social construct of woman as small and inferior to large and extraordinary.

Unlike her fellow American women peers who conformed to the conventional poetic style and theme infused with sentimentality, Dickinson was viewed as an unconventional poet who stretched the boundaries of writing. As a poet, she traverses through the “Undiscovered Continent” of the female mind and explores the immense possibilities of poetry as seen below:

Soto! Explore thyself!

Therein thyself shalt find

The “Undiscovered Continent” –

No Settler had the Mind. (832, 1-4)

Thus, her poetry was viewed as her attempt at writing with a difference transforming the lowly life of woman into an extraordinary life of power and autonomy:

The Bees – became as Butterflies –

The Butterflies – as Swans –

Approached – and spurned the narrow Grass –

And just the meanest Tunes

………………………………………………….
I took for Giants – practising

Titanic Opera – (593, 9-12, 15-16)

The chapter analyzed the woman poet’s play with the male-definition of woman as “small”, “little’ and “simple” in a paradoxical sense that assert the power of woman. Her poems reflect on her subtle subversion of patriarchal notions by transforming the small and insignificant woman’s life into a powerful existence (that enriches and empowers her as an indomitable woman poet) making a mockery of woman being “small” (271).

The chapter also considered her poems as expressions of the oppressive life of woman writer highlighting certain issues such as the painful “double bind” experienced by woman writer; the “anxiety of authorship”; the female writer’s journey from pain of isolation to self-assertion. Here is one such poem, which portrays the torment of woman writer in the patriarchal culture:

I would not paint – a picture –

I’d rather be the One

..............................

Evokes so sweet a Torment –

Such sumptuous – Despair – (505, 1-2, 7-8)

The chapter also traced the self-assertion of the woman writer in her revolt, in her creation of poetry as an exposure of female discrimination and in her affirmation through her choice of self-seclusion as a female writer.
Through her poems, she condemns female discrimination confining them within the stifling feminine sphere denying them the privileged life of men engaged in intellectual and artistic pursuits: “I could not bear to live – aloud/ The Racket shamed me so” (486, 11-12). Thus, Dickinson chooses to dwell in literary seclusion, which is her unique way of taking revenge against woman’s oppression in patriarchal culture.

The woman writer’s multidimensional approach to poetry comes to the fore in Dickinson’s poetry. This was analyzed in the chapter in the following manner: poetry as a practice of intellectual autonomy, as a refuge that helps resolution of female anger or anxiety from patriarchal suppression and poetry as revenge. Her poems become a weapon to stage her protest against patriarchal repressions on woman’s artistic and literary creativity:

There is a word

Which bears a sword (8, 1-2)

Interestingly Emily Dickinson’s poetry also throws light on the poet’s personality. This has been discussed thoroughly in the chapter, a nutshell of which is given here: Dickinson’s poetry as an expression of the secret self; Dickinson as a genuine, ingenious and unique woman writer, who vouches for the woman writer’s freedom; her unique poetic strategy to approach traditional notions of the woman poet; poetry as paradox; poetry as a double-edged knife leading to the suffering of the woman poet.

The chapter also observed how Emily Dickinson’s poetry divulges two major experiences of the woman writer: identity crisis as a writer and her
ultimate determination seen in her choice of poetry as vocation. In this
case, the poet personae primarily undergoing the above experiences, were
examined.

The chapter also looked into the woman poet’s ultimate choice of
poetry as her vocation. This is beautifully expressed in the poem below:

I reckon – when I count at all –

First – Poets- Then the Sun – (569, 1-2)

Eventually, the creation of a unique female poetry through female
language and philosophy; subversion of male poetic tradition; assertion of the
female self and use of womanly images are some of the issues dealt with in the
chapter.

The research arrived at the following conclusions in the process of this
study:

A study of Emily Dickinson’s poems has recognized the poet as the
precursor of feminist literary movement. She anticipates in her poems the
woman’s claim for emancipation and self-definition even before Women’s
Movement started spelling out the idea of woman’s emancipation. Though the
first wave of feminism surfaced during her time in late nineteenth and early
twentieth centuries in Europe and America as Women’s Suffrage Movement,
it was solely confined to women’s basic political rights. (viz. right to vote and
right to property). Dickinson’s poems, however, reflect the feminist spirit
particularly in their view of woman’s issues in a larger and broader context
that include a wide range of perspectives bordering on the socio-cultural,
religious, intellectual and artistic spheres. Hence, Dickinson’s poetry, which reverberates of feminism, is an important contribution to American poetry and particularly to woman’s writing. Her poems create a woman’s space in the nineteenth century literary context when there is no question of woman’s emancipation.

Dickinson’s poetry is also the voice of quest for self-definition both as a woman and as a woman poet in a repressive male-centric culture. In this context, her poems are her rendition of her life – the struggles, painful renunciations, seclusion and affirmation of her female self in poetic art. Hence, Emily Dickinson’s poetry can be viewed as the woman’s voice or women’s voices that not only express the woman’s oppression in patriarchal culture, but more significantly her war against repression to claim her autonomy, adequacy and self-definition in the society.

Viewing the woman/women voices in Dickinson’s poetry, the research contradicts the conventional critics’ opinion of Emily Dickinson’s as a “recluse”, “eccentric” or neurotic poet. The research on her poems reveals Dickinson to be an extraordinary intellectual and perceptive poet who exhibits incredible talent and wisdom of the world. This can be observed in her portrayal of varied women personae enacting divergent lives and experiences of women focusing on female discrimination, oppression, struggle for self-definition and autonomy in male-centric society. The poet’s precision and detail in enacting the varied monologues not only of the physical world but also of the psychological world of the women characters confirms that she is a keen observer of human life. For example, in her poems she enacts an excited, nervous bride, a lowly housewife oppressed with domestic slavery, an
aggressive woman, the “loaded Gun” ready to destroy her (passive) feminine self and even the madwoman suffering psychic fragmentation. The rich, fertile mind and the vibrant personality of the poet reflected in her woman personae cannot be that of a recluse or of an eccentric or a neurotic person. Moreover, the portrayal of serious woman’s issues relating to marriage, sex, religion and art cannot emerge from the mind of a recluse or that of an unstable mind. Hence, the research would like to conclude that Emily Dickinson’s lonely life is something to be explored deeper, particularly in relation to her poems. In this regard, her erotic /sex poems might have an answer to the question of the poet’s lonely and secluded life. Very often sexual violence, particularly child sexual abuse, could be seen as the root of such isolation tendencies. However, the constraint of the present research does not allow to probe deeper into this issue.

Examining the feminist perspective of Emily Dickinson poems, the research arrives at the conclusion of the woman poet as a revolutionary and visionary individual. She not only revolutionized the perception of women and toppled patriarchal hierarchies, standards and institutions but envisioned women’s empowerment. For example, one perceives in her poems the depiction of marriage and sex in a newer and more positive light. Herein lies the strength of Dickinson’s poetry. Through the issue of marriage and women’s oppression, she reiterates the need for women’s empowerment, which is emphasized through her depiction of women’s domestic slavery and her poetic expression of female power, strength and efficiency. Dickinson reveals women as unsung heroines without whose devalued labor the patriarchal world collapses:
Buzz the dull flies – on the chamber window –

Brave – shines the sun through the freckled pane –

Fearless – the cobweb swings from the ceiling –

Indolent Housewife – in Daisies –” (187, 9-12).

Woman’s sexuality, too, is treated in a revolutionary manner as the essence of pleasure, creativity and power, in a conservative puritanical patriarchal world that viewed sex as taboo.

Another significant conclusion of the research is related to the revolutionary and visionary zeal of the “Amherst” poet. Analyzing Dickinson’s poems, one perceives the poet’s leanings to Romanticism, particularly in the treatment of nature. Just as nature plays an important role in the romantic poetry, we find Dickinson’s poetry too represents nature significantly. However, while the Romantic poets romanticize nature and glorify its beauty and divine mysticism, Dickinson feminizes nature to transcend the repressive male-centric world. In her poems, she uses the feminine power, values and principles to seek female gratification and assertion. Interestingly, one also perceives in her poems the daring act of subversion of orthodox religion with nature images: “Sweet Mountains – Ye tell Me no lie –” (722, 1).

Further, the research also arrives at the conclusion that Dickinson’s leanings to Romanticism extend to her visionary spirit, particularly P.B.Shelley. Like Shelley, Dickinson in her poems envisages a new world order for woman, where she will be free from patriarchal tyranny and enjoy an
autonomous and fulfilling existence: “There is a morn by men unseen –” (24).
The woman poet also exhibits a similar poetic style like the romantic poet. This is observed in the poem below:

Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,

Dissolving into Dawn away (751, 4-5)

The above lines, which speak of death as the birth of a new liberated self, remind one of P.B. Shelley’s famous lines: O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (“Ode to the West Wind”).

Finally, the researcher’s exploration of Emily Dickinson’s views on religion has led to an interesting aspect in relation to the poet’s representation of Calvinist beliefs, ideals, principles and theological doctrines creating a cultural construct on which her poetry relies upon heavily. The researcher views that her strong religious leanings in her poems actually stage a subtle mockery of the religion itself. For instance, orthodox religious terminologies such as “Eden”, “White Election” and “Royal Seal” are subtly mocked at, either by juxtaposing with irreligious notions (“Eden” as paradise for sexual gratification) or by reducing to subordinate state (“White Election” as a choice to write poetry)

The research on Emily Dickinson’s poems as the “woman’s voice” would be incomplete without an analysis of the poet’s unique literary style. Dickinson’s poems display a distinctive poetic technique. Such a poetic technique can be seen in her distinct style observed in her punctuations, capitalizations, pauses or hyphens, “syntactic distortion”, “ellipsis”, “broken
rhetoric”, unusual metaphors (at times bordering on Gothic mode such as death, paws, goblins, dark, etc) and poetic strategy consisting of lyric, impersonations of varied personae signifying multifarious woman characters such as madwoman, housewife, daughter and nun. Her style brings to the fore the poet’s notions on woman’s subjugation in patriarchal culture and the consequent attempt at assertion of the female self. In other words, her poetic style creates an appropriate medium for the expression of the female self and sexuality in the male-centered society. Hence, one could consider her poetic style as deliberately gendered, to accommodate the recluse female poet’s interests.

Apart from the above discussions and conclusions on the study of Emily Dickinson’s poetry as “the woman’s voice”, the researcher has also identified some valid areas of study, which though, do not fall into the purview of this thesis, are however worth mentioning. The relevant issues concerning Dickinson’s poetry are summed up below.

Emily Dickinson’s use of Gothic in her poems to portray women’s oppression in patriarchal society, where women are shown, as “walking dead” or as rape victims could be a viable study for future research. This would represent an interesting study of women’s writing in Gothic art, particularly stressing on a comparison between nineteenth century Gothic male writers like Edgar Allan Poe and female writers like Emily Dickinson.

Another potential issue centers on the world of Emily Dickinson’s poetry. Here the question to be probed is, what characterizes her poetry. Such an exploration will lead to a keen observation of images, characters, spaces, flora/fauna, lexicon and poet persona/ personae. It would also help to solve the
complexity and ambiguity inherent in her poetry thereby divulging on another major dimension of Dickinson poems

To reiterate the discussion so far, Emily Dickinson is a female poet who has not only created a unique woman’s voice, but also redefined the history of women’s writing. Her varied women personae reflect a world of multifarious women voices that shatter conventional notions of women. Dickinson poetry acts like a prism that refracts and reforms patriarchal notions of the female self. However, her poetry, as a prism, also symbolizes the opposition to the “glass coffins” of patriarchy.

To conclude, Dickinson’s poetry represents the transcendent and conquering woman voice that speaks to the fellow women poets and advocates the uniqueness of a female voice in poetry. It is also a prophetic voice that heralds the dawn of a new world where women writers will rise from the grave of gender and enjoy an emancipated female literary culture:

There is another sky,

Ever serene and fair,

..........................

Here is a brighter garden,

Where not a frost has been; (2, 1-2, 9-10)

Thus, the “Amherst Myth” has woven a “Yarn of pearl,” and has never ceased to challenge critics and scholars with female poetic mysteries that mock at the patriarchal definition of woman being “small”: “And I sneered – softly – “small”!” (271, 13-16).