THE WOMAN’S VOICE: A STUDY OF THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON

ABSTRACT

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DICKINSON

The study of the woman’s voice in literature is relevant to understand the historically unrepresented or under-represented woman’s point of view or approach to life, society and values in which the woman lives. The voice of the woman, particularly in women’s writing, is the ‘invisible bullet’ that transforms what the text had so far traditionally represented. It shatters the text’s male constructed images and conventions that “‘killed’ [woman] into art” and revises “literary paternity” in order to claim female authorship and female autonomy (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 6, 1). Thus, the woman’s voice in literature acts as the subtext and subverts the text of the traditional critic.

Viewed from the above contention, Emily Dickinson can be considered today as one of the most original voices of the mid-nineteenth century American poetry, particularly when one studies the woman’s voice that emerges from her poetry. Dickinson has secured a place among not only American writers but also British writers. Dickinson’s poetry can be studied for the marginalized women’s voices in relation to women writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, George Eliot and the Brontes, who were firmly rooted in the female literary tradition.
developed in the nineteenth century. These women writers challenged the patriarchal definitions of women’s writing. They extricated their true self from the male constructed incapacitating images of women as “[g]host, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite” (Elizabeth Barret Browning, “Aurora Leigh”). They thus rejected a life of subservience and silence, and claimed their deserved life of autonomy as women and as women writers. They refuted what Gilbert and Gubar consider “the many-faceted glass coffins of the patriarchal texts whose properties male authors insisted that they are” (The Madwoman in the Attic 43).

Emily Dickinson’s poems particularly display a similar characteristic that reveals a revision of male hierarchy in literature. She challenged in her poems the subjugation of the women writers and asserted female literary prowess and authority with her unconventional poetic theme and style. It is this new tendency in her poetry that was not understood during her times and caused its critical neglect for a long time. Her literary skill was viewed skeptically as her poems deviated from the male-centric conventional poetic norms. It is only since the mid-twentieth century that Dickinson’s poetry has been rediscovered by feminist critics like Paula Bennett, Joan Kirkby, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar and Judith Farr and then by feminist publishers trying to map the literary terrain of the neglected and marginalized female writers. Hence,
contrary to the early critical views on Dickinson as an “eccentric” and “recluse” poet, the modern approach to her poetry has undergone radical changes.

Today not only feminist critics but also critics in general consider Dickinson as a unique creative voice and an invaluable female artist. Besides this, her poetry has been an inspiration to modern women writers like Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath and Marianne Moore, who have successfully challenged male domination in literature. The Dickinson poems have effectively helped bring due recognition to women writers, who had otherwise been ignored or misconstrued by patriarchy. Her poems have today secured for women writers in general an indomitable place in the male-dominated literary tradition.

The doctoral thesis entitled “The Woman’s Voice: A Study of the Poems of Emily Dickinson”, aims to examine the woman’s voice or women’s voices in her poems in order to comprehend and study the female ethos inherent in Emily Dickinson’s selected poems. The proposed study reviews major criticism on Dickinson, especially the feminist interpretation of her poems since 1950s. The researcher makes use of biographical, formalist, feminist, and interdisciplinary approaches to analyze her poems. Feminist theories of critics like Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, and Helen Cixous are discussed in relation to
her poems in order to understand the power relationships that existed in her times and also the female attitudes to patriarchal dominance in social and discursive matters.

The contents of the thesis have been organized in the following manner:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Writing the Female Self

Chapter 3: View of Religion

Chapter 4: Marriage and Sex

Chapter 5: Woman as Writer

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Chapter I

Introduction

The introductory chapter highlights certain dimensions of Dickinson’s biographical and poetic life. Emily Dickinson was born on 10th December, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts, in a New England puritanical culture that curbed woman’s efforts and aspirations. She rejected for herself traditional womanhood of domesticity, defined in terms of marriage, motherhood and religion and rather opted for a life of
creative writing. She lived a “cloistered” life in her own home and pursued her poetic vocation.

Dickinson’s poetry expresses her awareness of the subordinate status of woman in her times and her reproof of woman’s cultural isolation and artistic alienation. Dickinson herself was a victim of her society’s exclusion of woman from literary sphere and hence remained an unpublished writer till death. However, her writings exhibit her determined fight against it. Through her letters and poems, Dickinson reacted against the New England Puritan society that repressed woman. Dickinson lived in an era when the man solely enjoyed the privileges of public life, power and intellectual or creative authority, while woman was confined to a life of traditional role, dependence, self-denial and repression. In such a society, patriarchy entrapped woman in superstitious beliefs and cultivated female discrimination. Dickinson herself recounts one such instance of discrimination. In a letter to her mentor and acclaimed literary man Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dickinson stated that her father (Edward Dickinson) buys her many books but begs her “not to read them- because he fears they joggle the Mind” (L 261). In addition, her brother (Austin) was immensely encouraged by her father in all intellectual and academic pursuits while the daughters were not encouraged to do so.
Emily Dickinson’s poetry is viewed here in the context of the female literary tradition, particularly that of her fellow American women writers. These writers like Lydia Huntley Sigourney and Helen Hunt Jackson mostly wrote verse on motherhood, death and nature. Their writings, typically conventional in style, “focus on the duties and obligations, the joys and sorrows, of domestic existence” (Bennett 4). Their hypocritical stance of refinement and timid succumbing to patriarchal will is criticized in Dickinson’s own words as “What Soft – Cherubic Creatures” or as “Brittleladies,” or “Gentlewomen” (401). Dickinson stands apart from her American women of letters, since her poetry represents her uncompromising approach to life, religion, marriage, sex, patriarchy and her own writings.

Dickinson rather drew her inspiration from British women writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot and the Bronte sisters. These women writers’ works represent original and rich expression of the female literary tradition, which she admired. In fact, Dickinson herself underwent her “Conversion of Mind” after reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem, “Aurora Leigh”.

Dickinson has had to face many challenges as a woman poet. Despite her willful solitude, her desire to be recognized as a poet is expressed repeatedly in her poems. The poet also faced criticism for
“stylistic obscurities and formal irregularities” (Pollak 227). From the voluminous poems (fascicles) found posthumously from her drawers, one can guess that Dickinson suffered a “fundamental alienation from her own name - it is not hers to risk, publicize, or even immortalize” (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 555). This shows that being a woman she didn’t even have a claim to her own self, not even her own name. However, despite the aesthetic neglect she faced in her lifetime, her writings have withstood the test of time and have tilted the scales to make this once obscure Amherst poet into one of the best American poets today.

The reason for her poetic fame today lies in Dickinson’s unconventional approach to poetry. Her poem quoted here becomes the harbinger of Dickinson’s approach:

A Word made Flesh is seldom

And tremblingly partook

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

A Word that breathes distinctly

Has not the power to die (1651, 1-2, 9-10)

Her approach to writing, as seen from the above lines, helps assert herself as a writer and state what true poetry means and who a true poet is. The
above poem gives a strong feminist message that woman might be repressed but not her “Word”, i.e., writing.

Her unconventional approach can also be seen from her diverse use of the lyric form. The lyric form, is a genre that is “…traditionally the most Satanically assertive, daring, and therefore precarious of literary modes for women” (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 582). She converted the lyric form into “complex and highly elliptical syntactic structures of a sort not usually found in lyric” (McNeil 32). She has revolutionized the lyric, despite protests by Higginson, who called her poems as “spasmodic,” “abominable,” “uncontrolled” and “dark”.

Dickinson’s revolutionary approach to poetry can be seen also in her poetic style, particularly her lexicon – “syntactic compression: unusual juxtaposition of images: and her unconventional use of punctuation, capitalization, space and line…” – in her poems as echoing the poet’s “aesthetics of silence” (Leder & Abbott 189).

Thus, Dickinson’s unique poems, dismissed initially as irrelevant came to enjoy serious critical attention elevating her status to the forerunner of feminist poetry. The fierce defiance of male literary hegemony and social authority has long appealed to feminist critics, who consistently place the Amherst poet in the company of such major writers
as Anne Bradstreet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Bronte sisters, Jane Austen, Christina Rossetti, George Eliot, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich.

To understand the feminist scholarly attention on Dickinson’s poetry, the researcher attempts a critical overview of select feminist criticism on her works. Many feminist critics have explored her poems as an integral part of women’s writing. Adrienne Rich considers that, Dickinson experienced herself “as a loaded gun” and “felt the lethal power of poetry for women” (Dickie 344). Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar regard Dickinson the center of “study of women writers and the nineteenth century literary imagination”, viewing her poems as representations of “the split in the nineteenth century woman writer between her conventional role in society and her creativity, between the Angel in the House and the madwoman in the attic” (Dickie 344). Margaret Homans views the poet’s “liberating effect of the nonreferentiality of her language, her manipulation of language to reverse its ordinary meanings, and her undoing of rhetorical dualism as a model for a revised pattern of relation between the sexes” (Kirkby 140). Barbara Mossberg discovers in Dickinson’s poems and letters a “powerful feminist insight” on “the mother-daughter relationship”, and her refutation of her mother’s dreary fate of being an insipid subservient conventional woman by opting a life of poetic art. (Kirkby 145). Joanne
Feit Diehl revises “Harold Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence” and “shows how Dickinson used her sense of exclusion and estrangements as a source of power” (Dickie 344).

Chapter II

Writing the Female Self

In the backdrop of the puritanical patriarchal world of mid-nineteenth century New England, Emily Dickinson’s act of writing poetry is an act of writing the female self. The very act of writing itself is an act of rebellion that challenged the New England Puritan norms. In writing her poems, she chose to give voice to the emerging female self and employed a language that was not only implicitly revolutionary but also explicitly feminist, what contemporary feminists identified as a quiet aesthetic revolution. Helen Cixous mentions that woman must shed her silence and repression and “write her self” in order to assert “… her own rights, in every symbolic terms, in every political processes.” Only then, woman can reject the submissive self, created artificially by “the militant male” and affirm her autonomy and dignity (“The Laugh of the Medusa” 347).

Her poems reflect her attempt to recreate herself as a self-reliant person through writing and renunciation. The act of writing had always been considered as a man’s privilege. Women were either trapped in the
male texts as mute objects of art or suppressed with male-inscribed ideologies of idealized womanhood and false femininity like self-denial, passivity or domesticity. Cixous has rightly stated: “Muffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts” (356). Dickinson breaks the silence, articulates her subversive thought and challenges the male governed domain of speech. She writes strongly about woman and her female self, asserting her entitled rights to individuality as a woman and claiming a deserved place in the history of mankind. Her choice to be a poet is brought out in her line “Title – Confirmed –” and her vision as a poet is spelled out in her words “Mine – here – in Vision – and in Veto!” (528, 5, 7).

Emily Dickinson’s view of renunciation (of the patriarchal world) reflects her leanings to Transcendentalism, which asserts the supremacy of mind over matter. Emerson’s concepts of Transcendentalism like the ‘oversoul,’ individualism, self-expression and self-reliance emerge in her poems. Transcendentalism initiates the individual into a deep connection with the oversoul which has also been called the “moral law” through the use of reason and understanding. (Emerson’s “Nature”). Understanding, for the transcendentalist is the mechanical faculty of knowledge, whereas Reason is linked to instinct, intuition and imagination. The transcendental
poet epitomizes the link between the actual world and the spiritual oversoul. However, she employs Transcendentalism in a new manner when she links transcendental ideas to enable woman transcend the male-defined feminine sphere in order to assert the female self.

Dickinson feminizes oversoul to overcome female repression. She shows by her own secluded life and work that woman can transcend the cult of womanhood and that she can rejuvenate her repressed female self in the very same private sphere within which she is confined. Her poetry originates from the closed spaces of the private sphere that allows her to access the power and ability of Reason. Poetry, therefore, written in the confines of her room enables her to transcend the repressive actual world and becomes the only possible link with the larger spiritual world. She transforms the closed feminine space into a realm of infinite freedom and opportunity for creativity. Such a freedom in the writer’s self helps her attain self-definition in the larger or greater spiritual universe:

Exhilaration – is within –

There can be no Outer Wine

So royally intoxicate

As that diviner Brand

The Soul achieves – Herself – (382, 1-4, 5)
Hence, she defines herself as a transcendent female self who is “alive” and omnipotent thus:

To be alive – is Power –

Existence – in – itself

Without a further function –

Omnipotence – Enough – (677, 1-4)

Dickinson’s transcendental self is different from the male created one, in the sense that she focuses primarily on woman’s private life, domesticity and the feminine sphere that centers woman, unlike man’s focus on public life, war, politics, and commerce celebrating masculine power. For example, Emerson relates man to “a strong subject exerting power over and internalizing everything he sees…” (Homans, “Oh, Vision of Language!” 114). Similarly, Whitman’s poems “expresses confidence in male agency, aggression and ultimate mastery” (Martin, *An American Triptych* 135). While the masculine tradition centering on male self excludes woman, Dickinson’s all-inclusive poetry centering on the female self universalizes the female self. In the poem, “I Dwell in Possibility” the word “Possibility” epitomizes poetry as an avenue for woman’s freedom and opportunity through female imagination. Hence, poetry is “fairer House than Prose” as seen below:
I Dwell in Possibility –

A fairer House than Prose – (657, 1-2)

The toppling of hierarchies established above – the private versus the public self, or the female versus the male self – reveals the emergence of the transcendental female self as different from the male one.

The uniqueness of the female transcendental self is that it is not confined to transcendental self alone, but also emerges as a unique sexual voice. Dickinson’s expression of the sexual self is seen in her glorification of the female body. Using nature imagery the woman poet expresses the greatness of the female body: “Scarlet and Gold/Many a Bulb will rise” (66, 2-3). Her assertion of the female body as life-source and representation of nature’s mysteries shatters male’s self-proclaimed power and superiority over female body.

Dickinson’s poems reveal her bold representation of the female sexual imagery, particularly the vagina and the clitoris represented by “crumbs, berries, peas, pearls and other small rounded objects” (Bennett, Emily Dickinson 154). Through these images of female sexuality, she revolutionizes female writing making it “visible, giving it presence and name” (Bennett, “Critical Cliterodectomy” 236).
Dickinson’s poetry brings out the emergence of an aggressive female self that resists subordination and upholds female power and supremacy. According to feminist critics, a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic and threatens to shatter the framework of institutions. Her poems express the power of female texts created by female sexual energy emerging from the dark, interior silence that can effortlessly “ooze away” the constricting patriarchal structures or “Cities.” Such a metaphor is brought out in the lines below:

A still – Volcano – Life –

That flickered in the night –

…………………………

Whose hissing Corals part – and shut –

And Cities – ooze away – (601, 1-2, 11-12)

Thus, through her description of the female self, Dickinson transcends the conventional notions of womanhood (docility, timidity, self-denial) normally perceived in New England. Writing within the confines of a repressive society, Dickinson with her emphasis on woman’s autonomy explodes the patriarchal discourse on woman poet. Such an exploding of conventional discourse on woman is experienced
not only in her notion of the female self but also in her views on religion. This is dealt with in the next chapter.

Chapter III

View of Religion

The chapter studies Dickinson’s poems in the context of several religious references and views that surface from her poems. From such a study, one understands the poet’s approach to religion. Dickinson does not respect orthodox puritanical religion, which she regards as patriarchal conspiracy to usurp power and authority to subjugate woman. The woman poet’s negative attitude to Christianity can be understood here:

He preached upon “Breadth” till it argued him narrow –

The Broad are too broad to define

And of “Truth” until it proclaimed him a Liar –

The truth never flaunted a Sign – (1207, 1-4)

The above lines describe the denigration that any religion or religious doctrine can lead one to: “Even the broadest approach to religious doctrine will argue itself both narrow and a lie, once it mounts the pulpit to proclaim its ‘Truth.’” (Bennett, Emily Dickinson 52).
The chapter examines Dickinson’s religious life in the New England environment. From an early age, Dickinson disapproved and disagreed with the spirit of puritanical fervor that swept New England during her times. In her private letters to Higginson, she ridicules the family religiosity that pervades every New England household: “They are all religious – except me – and address an Eclipse, every morning – whom they call their ‘Father.’” (L 261).

Dickinson also rejected conventional faith and gave up attending the church as she found it repressive. She rather preferred to write poetry, where she would be free from the gender biased orthodox theology. A very interesting poem sums up her preference of poetry to religion:

Some keep the Sabbath going to church

I – keep it – staying at Home

With a Bobolink for a Chorister –

And an Orchard, for a Dome – (324, 1-4)

Certain attitudes or views also surface on religion from Dickinson’s poems. Exploring the key ideas in her religious poetry such as death, immortality, and nature of God, she passionately protests against the misogynist values that androcentric religion encodes. She
condemns the constricting feminine values of self-denial, domesticity and submissiveness and also the denial of freedom to woman, which the orthodox religion upholds. Dickinson’s poems recount the painful sufferings, alienation, injustice and exclusion subjected to woman by religious orthodoxy and culture.

Dickinson’s metaphors and their reading are relevant to understand her views on religion. Identification of woman with images like mouse, rat, minor, and bird leads to a deliberate irony that woman despite being a subhuman creature can still challenge the patriarchal religious structures. In the process, she subverts the symbolic order and converts male-centric notions of feminine weakness and servility endorsed by the church. Through the image of the lowly timid mouse, she seeks divine intervention to oust the dominant paternal metaphor, “the Cat” to claim her deprived place as a woman and demands no less than a “Mansion” as her reserved place in the symbolic system:

Papa above!

Regard a mouse

Overpowered by the Cat!

Reserve within thy kingdom

A “Mansion” for the Rat! (61, 1-5)
From the above lines, it is evident that “Dickinson challenges the Papa, the Master, the entire patriarchal structure by subverting and replacing the Symbolic Order – ruled as it is by the Law of the Father – with her reformulation of a metaphor for women’s redemption” (Hoefel, “Emily Dickinson Fleshing Out a New World”).

Attempts to challenge certain conventional religious notions i.e. belief in life after death and the sacrosanct identity of the Bible, are also found in Dickinson’s works. Her invalidation of the religious doctrine of life after death can be seen in several of her poems. Such a doctrine annihilates the joy of living with its false promises of eternal life after death. In one of her significant poems, “Because I could not stop for Death”, depicting the scene of the journey of the woman persona towards Eternity, she ridicules and invalidates the patriarchal doctrines about heavenly bliss in eternity after death: “I first surmised the Horses Heads /Were toward Eternity" (712, 23-24). Dickinson in the poem points out that woman should not be deluded by false heavenly picture of eternal life in “Eternity” because it is a state of existence without beginning or end, and this is what lies beyond death.

Dickinson’s mistrust of religion is seen further in her mistrust of the Bible as a sacred text, seen in the following lines:

The Bible is an antique Volume –
Written by faded Men

At the suggestion of Holy Spectres (1545, 1-3)

She declares that “faded” men had written the “antique Volume” manipulating the divine truths to affirm and maintain a natural supremacy over women. The phrase “Holy Spectres” signifies the “dubious authority over Scripture” by the patriarchal tradition. (Loeffelholz 55). Supporting the poet’s views against the authenticity of the Bible, Ostriker comments: “…its authority is always socially constructed, yet always attempts to represent itself as divine” (61).

Dickinson’s alternative to theology is poetry itself, which offers a counter-religious zeal. Her poems reflect her attempt to overcome woman’s painful feeling of alienation by choosing poetry as her alternative to religion. In her new religion, woman will feel involved and her values recognized. Thus, Emily Dickinson’s divinity in poetry transcends the exclusion, repression and limitations imposed on woman by patriarchal theology. Instead, her poetry embraces adversity as a positive spirit of powerful energy that helps affirm herself as an indomitable woman poet. Through her poetry, Dickinson seeks an alternative inviolate territory i.e. the development of a tradition of women poets, distinct from that delineated by the male poetic tradition, where a feminine divine order celebrates the majesty of woman:
There is another sky,

Ever serene and fair,

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

Here is a brighter garden,

Where not a frost has been;

In its unfading flowers

I hear the bright bee hum;

Prithee, my brother,

Into my garden come! (2, 1-2, 7-14)

Emily Dickinson visualizes such a celebration of woman in a free and happy environment not only in relation to theology but also in relation to the domestic realm of marriage and sex, which will be dealt with in the ensuing chapter.

Chapter IV

Marriage and Sex

Feminists consider marriage and sex as the two vital spheres that manifest the subjugation and exploitation of woman by man. Radical
feminists opine that patriarchal husband enslaves woman to domesticity, dependency and motherhood and also deprives her of individuality, self-definition, equal dignity and liberty. Kate Millet condemns marriage as the agency that maintains the traditional pattern of man’s power over woman. Simone de Beauvoir remarks that woman’s function in marriage is to “provide the society with children … [to] take care of his household” and also provide him with sexual pleasure even at the expense of her own erotic life. (446-7,455). Regarding woman’s sexual subjugation in man’s hands, Germaine Greer and Helen Cixous denounce the repression of woman’s sexuality that leads her to develop a sense of shame about her own body.

The chapter examines different issues of marriage manifested in Dickinson’s poems that discuss the subordinate status of woman after marriage and her social vulnerability, where marriage symbolizes death-in-life and life-in-death in the context of woman’s suppression.

In Emily Dickinson’s poems, “marriage” symbolizes “death-in-life” for woman. Dickinson’s letter to Susan Gilbert Dickinson expresses her genuine anguish at the one-sided suffering of woman as “wife forgotten” pining for the militant man that “scorches them, scathes them” (L93). Her poem, “Title divine – is mine!” interlinks marriage and death for woman, with her wedding becoming virtually a funeral: “Born –
Bridalled – Shrouded –/In a Day –” (1072, 10-11). This hollow status of marriage is ironically described by Dickinson as ‘unearthly translation’ or death-in-life for the woman because she has bargained her talents and existence to be an insipid subservient wife. (Kirkby 69). She loses her creativity and aesthetic gifts – “Amplitude”, “Awe”, “first Prospective” and “Gold”– without getting an opportunity to explore what she might have been or what she might have created. (732).

Lastly, the chapter focuses on the issue of sex apparent in Dickinson’s poetry. Several sexual themes such as female sexual gratification, assertion of repressed female sexuality through depiction of homoeroticism and heterosexuality, occasional presentation of the female anxiety due to loss of sexuality, threat of sexual violence and woman’s sexual frustrations emerge in her poems.

Delving on denial or repressed female sexuality, this New England poet emphasizes that sexual fulfillment remains unattainable for woman. Indoctrinated with false femininity, woman is led to feel ashamed of her sexuality. This is largely due to phallocentric hierarchies. Such phallocentric hierarchies are read in various cultural beliefs. This can be seen in Freud and Lacan terming female sexuality as “lack”, “taboo”, “dark” or “castrated”. When phallocentric hierarchies disempowered woman, she suffered from want of gratification of her repressed sexuality.
As such, the subject of female sexual gratification is relevant in Emily Dickinson’s poems. This can be observed in the poem below:

Wild Nights – Wild Nights!

Were I with thee

Wild Nights should be

Our luxury! (249, 1-4)

In this extremely erotic poem, the woman’s repressed female sexuality passionately yearns to experience the ecstasy of sexual fulfillment with her lover. The storm of the physical world indicated by the opening line of the poem, “Wild Nights – Wild Nights!” is an analogue to the intense tumultuous sexual passions of the woman, who wishes that she were with her lover to enjoy “Luxury”.

However, Dickinson’s erotic poetry often raises critical controversies and contradictions about the issue of homosexuality, particularly bordering on homoeroticism and clitorocentrism. Here is one of her letters that suggest an erotic sensitivity to her intimate friend and sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson: “Only think of I, Susie; I had’nt any appetite, nor any, Lover, either, so I made the best of fate, and gathered antique stones, and your little flower of moss opened their lips and spoke to me, so I was not alone” ([L 202] qtd. in Bennett, Emily
Therefore, it would be proper to relate Dickinson’s lesbian streak as a woman’s “desire to avoid being reduced to an object for men or a desire to compete with men on their own territory” (Fallaize 206). Here homoeroticism becomes a subtle defiance of the hierarchies of phallocentrism, by privileging the power of the clitoris, a female sex organ, which exists purely for pleasure. Through advocacy of clitorocentrism, Dickinson’s poems empower repressed female sexuality. The overtly homoerotic poem “All the letters I can write” (334) addressed to her cousin Eudocia (Converse) Flynt is a fine example of her claims of clitorocentricism:

   Depths of Ruby, undrained –

   Hid, Lip, for Thee,

   Play it were a Humming Bird

   And sipped just Me – (334, 1-4)

As Bennett interprets, “the ‘excess’ this organ represents – the excess of absolute sexual autonomy – is a threat to individual men and to male rule generally” (Bennett, “Critical Clitorodectomy” 238).

Several of Dickinson’s poems also explore a newer dimension of sex i.e. the threat of sexual violence suffered by woman in the male dominated society. The woman is the silent and secret sufferer
who is unable to redress her grievances amidst an overpowering patriarchy that silences her. Hence, she lives in torment – afraid to own her female body and suffer “continual fear of its violation, psychological and physical” (Wardrop 72). The poem below provides a glimpse of the silenced woman:

I am afraid to own a Body –

I am afraid to own a Soul – (1090, 1-2)

The above fear of the female persona only implicates woman’s fear of the body due to fear of sexual violation. Most often, the expressions of rape appear euphemistically and metaphorically, as seen in Dickinson’s use of the gothic medium to represent the fear and horror of sexual assault. Her use of natural and supernatural settings, animal imagery, monsters and goblins to enact the sex crime, reveals that for the poet’s “gothic heroine, the thought of sex is often inextricably conjoined with the thought of pain or death” (Wardrop 70). Dickinson’s poem “One Anguish- in a Crowd” employs animal imagery to depict the horror and brutality of a grisly gang rape:

One Anguish – in a Crowd –

A Minor thing – it sounds –

And yet, unto the Single Doe
Attempted of the Hounds (565, 1-4)

In the above poem, the gruesome act of a woman hideously gang raped is enacted metaphorically in a hunt scene where the single “Doe” is chased and brutally attacked by a pack of Hounds. “Hounds” exemplify the beastly character of animals and refers to the male villains. Dickinson’s perspective on the issue mentioned above point to a woman writer’s approach, which will be the subject of discussion in the next chapter.

Chapter V

Woman as Writer

Emily Dickinson’s writing manifests a feminist content. Here the focus is on the poet as a woman and a writer. Hence, her writing as a product influenced by her experiences as a woman is emphasized. Stretching the boundaries of writing, the poet traverses through the “Undiscovered Continent” of her female mind and explores the immense possibilities of poetry as seen in her verse below:

Soto!Explore thyself!

Therein thyself shalt find

The “Undiscovered Continent” –

No Settler had the Mind (832, 1-4)
Her private space of the mind reminds us of Virginia Woolf who stresses on woman’s privacy “a room of her own if she is to write fiction”, a room, which symbolizes detachment, freedom, autonomy, means, opportunity and of one’s own self. (*A Room of One’s Own*). Thus, Dickinson’s writings seek “taller feet” competing with man on man’s territories, especially the territory of the mind (Bennett, *Emily Dickinson* 17).

Dickinson’s poetry can be considered as an attempt at writing with a difference. The difference is perceived in her unconventional writing that liberates her from passing through trodden paths and helps her establish new ways of looking at life and poetry as a female muse:

The Bees – became as Butterflies –

The Butterflies – as Swans –

Approached – and spurned the narrow Grass –

And just the meanest Tunes

The Nature murmured to herself

To keep herself in Cheer –

I took for Giants – practising

Titanic Opera – (593, 9-16)
Dickinson as a woman writing with a difference can be seen in several ways. Firstly, Dickinson envisions poetry as a vehicle of woman’s lowly life in an extraordinary poetic environment. Through this new lease of life in poetry, woman’s repressed female self gets empowered and emancipated just as the humble “Bees” are transformed to beautiful “Butterflies”. Here, it is significant that the poet induces such transformations through images of the feminine nature thereby asserting her female self. The significance here is that the poet rises above the “narrow circumference of earth-bound female domesticity and throws a challenge to the ‘low’ or ‘inferior’ state to open the vista of new possibility of viewing in a new way womanhood and also herself as a woman poet” (Bennett, *Emily Dickinson* 17).

Secondly, she sets her own standards of how a woman poet should write in order to be a representative poet. She does not allow the social prohibitions on her gender to hamper her aspiration. Mossberg rightly points out that “…in her aesthetics less is more, small is greater” (198).

Thirdly, one can define Dickinson’s poetry as writing with a difference in the sense that poetry becomes a weapon to stage her protest against patriarchal repressions on woman’s artistic and literary creativity. There are two issues addressed in her poetry for this purpose – male dominance over writing and male portrayal of woman. Through her
poems, Dickinson boldly challenges the male control of authorship by asserting a powerful latent female creativity. This can be seen in the following poem:

My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –

In Corners – till a Day

The Owner passed – identified –

And carried Me away – (754, 1-4)

Interestingly the New England writer’s poetry throws light on her personality. This is discussed thoroughly in the chapter, a nutshell of which is given below: 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 double-edged knife leading to the suffering of the woman poet. To cite one example, her recurrent motif of “white” in her poems is examined. White color as seen in “White Election” “White Heat” describes both the painful renunciation for self-creation as a woman poet as well as the bliss of self-empowerment of a woman in the repressive culture. It also symbolizes the pale femininity on one hand and on the other, the purity of female art.
Women writers in the nineteenth century, who had taken up the vocation of creative writing, had to pay the heavy price of “isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness and obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture” (Gilbert and Gubar, “Infection in the Sentence” 25). Dickinson’s poetry also depicts such an existential dilemma of the woman writer. Linking identity with fate symbolized by a “hound” from which one cannot escape, she illustrates the existential dilemma of a woman writer:

This consciousness that is aware

Of Neighbours and the Sun

Will be the one aware of Death

And that itself alone

……………………………

Adventure most unto itself

The Soul condemned to be –

Attended by a single Hound

Its own identity (822, 1-4, 13-16)
Hence, Dickinson’s poems cast light on woman writer’s dilemma – “her split, fragmented or plural sense of self; sexual inconsistency and division; the self as alien to “itself” (Mossberg 25).

However, Dickinson’s depiction of the woman writer’s dilemma does not deter her from declaring poetry as woman’s vocation. The woman writer’s self-affirmation can be seen in her act of privileging poetry over religion and universe, when she dares to place the poets above the patriarchal God and its symbolic order:

I reckon – when I count at all –

First – Poets – Then the Sun –

Then Summer – Then the Heaven of God –

And then – the List is done – (569, 1-4)

According to Dickinson, the vocation of poetry enables her to attain a “largeness of life” that surpasses the omnipotent male sovereignty and dominion that ignores and trivializes her as a woman. As Kirkby remarks, “Dickinson’s sense of the largeness of life she elected contrasts markedly of the general view of the smallness of her life” (2). To her it’s a choice that stands supreme to all other man’s prescriptions to woman. Thus, she asserts herself as a woman poet through her chosen vocation and transforms her repressive mundane life to an extraordinary magical life of
poetic possibilities. It is in this sense that her poetry can be considered as a paradox or a double-edged knife, revealing both the suffering and affirmation of the writer.

Dickinson thus proves to be a successful woman poet who establishes an affirmation of the female experience through poetry. Through her poems, she subverts what Showalter refers to as “the cultural and historical forces that relegated women’s experience to the second rank” (286). She affirms female experience by not refuting but immersing herself in the female domesticity to sustain her creative energy. Emily Dickinson’s poems reveal many interesting facts and dimensions of her poetry. The above would be the subject of discussion in the concluding chapter.

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 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 the 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).
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