Chapter I

Introduction

Emily Dickinson is considered today as one of the most original voices of the mid-nineteenth century American poetry. She has secured a place among women writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, George Eliot and the Bronte’s, who are firmly rooted in the “female literary tradition”, developed in the nineteenth century. (Bennett, *Emily Dickinson* 14). These women writers challenged the patriarchal definitions of women’s writing. They extricated their true selves from the male construct, incapacitating images of “[g]host, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,” to reject the death-like life of subservience and silence and claimed their deserved life of speech and autonomy as women and as women writers. (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Aurora Leigh”). They refuted what Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar called “the many-faceted glass coffins of the patriarchal texts whose properties male authors insisted that they are” (*The Madwoman in the Attic* 43). These writers created a female aesthetic ethic that forms the basis of an alternative tradition to the androcentric society in which they lived.

Dickinson’s poems display a similar characteristic that reveals an upheaval and revision of male hierarchy in literature. She challenged the subjugation of women writers and asserted female literary prowess and authority with her unconventional poetic theme and style. It is this unique tendency in her poetry that was not understood during her times and caused the critical neglect of her poetry for a long time. Her literary skill was viewed
skeptically as it subverted the male-centric literary 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 by several publishers who were 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 also been an inspiration to modern women writers like Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath and Marianne Moore who have successfully challenged male hierarchy in literature. Dickinson’s poems have successfully contributed to bring due recognition to women writers who had otherwise been ignored or misconstrued by the prevailing patriarchal writers and secured for them an indomitable place in the male-dominated literary tradition. As a self-created woman poet, she has proven that women are not what the male critics or “Sages” claim “small” and inconsequential. Through her poetry, she claims that women have great talents of artistic creativity and are also capable of re-incarnation like a phoenix from the entrapments of “small” and insipid life to a life of largeness with their female poetic art. Thus, she sneers at the idea of women being “small”, and she cleverly inverts the idea of smallness of women to project women writers’ infinite horizons. This can be seen in the poem quoted below:

And then – the size of this “small” life –
The Sages – call it small –
Swelled – like Horizons – in my vest –
And I sneered – softly – “small”! (271, 13-16)¹

Emily Dickinson, born on 10th December, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts, in a culture that curbed woman’s efforts and aspirations, opted for a life of art, by rejecting the traditional role of womanhood defined in terms of marriage, motherhood and religion. She gave up marriage and male-defined womanhood that subjugated woman and remained a spinster in her lifetime to dedicate her life to poetry. To escape from the insipid life of subservience, self-denial and domesticity that woman of her times was enforced to lead under the dominant man, she lived as a recluse in her father’s home and pursued her poetic interests. She was exceptionally sensitive to the sexual rhetoric of her culture and the subordinate status of woman in it. Patriarchy condemned woman as the inferior, weaker sex incapable of higher pursuits of life. These restrictions on woman’s intellectual pursuits can be understood from male writer’s views. Aristotle considered woman as a subject unfit for tragedy. Similarly, Ruskin Bond states “…the woman’s power is not for rule, not for battle and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet orderings” in household domesticity (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic 24). Dickinson was also a victim of the patriarchal exclusion of woman from literary sphere. However, she determinedly fought against patriarchy through her choice of devoting her entire life in poetry.

Through her letters and poems, Dickinson reacted against the social text that discouraged woman from intellectual and creative pursuits and confined her to domesticity and a subservient powerless life under the
powerful domineering man. Dickinson lived in an era when the grandeur of public life, power, intellectual and creative authorities were the exclusive rights of the patriarchal man, whereas woman was confined to insignificant private life of dependence, self-denial and repression. Patriarchy dissuaded woman from being intellectually alive by insisting that mental exertion was detrimental to female health. The patriarchal society believed that “[r] Reading and cerebral activity were felt to drain energy from the womb resulting in impairment of the reproductive function…” (Martin, An American Triptych 88). Such a belief is an instance of how patriarchy discriminated woman. Dickinson recounts her own experience of female discrimination arising out of such false beliefs in her family. This is seen when she wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, her mentor, a man of acclaimed literary status of the time, stating that her father 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. Dickinson’s resentment at such female discrimination is implicit in a letter addressed to her brother. She makes a sarcastic remark about how her father takes great delight in reading her brother’s letter: “… [He] puts on his spectacles and reads o’er and o’er as if it were a blessing to have an only son” ([L, 1:231, no.108] qtd. in Martin, An American Triptych 96). Despite such discrimination, she defied incapacitating attempts to frustrate her intellectual and creative ambitions and pursued poetry within the confines of domesticity.

Dickinson’s poetry reveals a painful awareness of the pathetic plight of woman living insignificantly at the mercy of an omnipotent father or husband
figure or “owner”. Woman, either as daughter or as wife, is reduced to dependent inferior beings living an insignificant subservient life. Her life is circumscribed by patriarchal culture confining her to the repressive domestic sphere where she is enforced to lead a life of drudgery. She is denied autonomy to realize her goal, ambition and self-definition as woman. Woman’s plight at man’s control of her, man’s pride of chiseling woman into a carefully constructed art piece and also man’s denial of her right to existence are some experiences that the following verse describes:

He found my Being – set it up –

Adjusted it to place –

Then carved his name – upon it –

And bade it to the East (603, 1-4)

Dickinson’s disheartening awareness of the woman’s subservient existence springs from her own familial circumstances. Her own family stands for the puritanical patriarchal world where “men initiated actions and women responded to them” (Pollak 29). Her father represents the typical domineering male power and authority – “a remote, powerful, and grim patriarch” (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 597). Her mother, Emily Norcross, was a sickly, submissive woman who suffered from chronic invalidism due to “Acute Neuralgia” (L 36). This was the distressing state of many women in the repressive patriarchal society whose experiences were trivialized and whose preferences were slighted or regarded as inconsequential. They were reduced to helpless nervous wrecks and became “permanently bedridden, literally acting out their culturally enforced passivity” (Martin, *An American Triptych* 93).
As a woman poet, Dickinson became the voice of the gender-marked woman who was repressed with enforced silence by man. In fact, she was the only American woman poet of the nineteenth century to assimilate through poetry the constricting ideology of the “feminine” and at the same time transcend conventions, and firmly challenge woman’s repressions. The repression that she experienced in her own life became a poetic necessity, and it is this repression and pain that went into her poetry, as expressed here:

I lived on Dread –
To those who know
The Stimulus there is
In Danger – Other impetus
Is numb – and Vitalless – (770, 1-5)

Such pain proved to be the only vital and forceful “Stimulus” to produce poems that transmit woman’s oppression and effectively make her the voice of the voiceless woman.

Dickinson’s poetry exposes the subjugation of the daughter in the nineteenth century New England household. Through her rhetoric of meekness and poverty, the poet condemns the daughter’s confinement to an oppressive insignificant life as a small, unnoticed, weak object:

I never spoke – unless addressed –
And then ’twas brief and low –
I could not bear to live – aloud –

The Racket shamed me so – (486, 9-12)

“The Racket” symbolizes patriarchal norms that are of tall order, near which woman appear to be humbled, silent and timid. Mossberg’s remark on
Dickinson’s patriarchal world is relevant in this context: “Emily Dickinson arrives as an intellectual and sexual refugee from an age in which she felt she could not speak, could not be heard – an age which tried to ‘shut me[her] up in Prose’…” (17).

An attempt to trace Dickinson’s struggle for survival as a female poet is explored here. Dickinson took the risk of violating the patriarchal cultural norms on woman and carved a niche in the male-centric literary domain as a formidable woman poet with her unorthodox and original poetry. Outwardly, she followed the conventional passive femininity and remained a dutiful daughter immersed in domesticity. Inwardly, she was the rebellious daughter subverting the patriarchal diktat against woman’s pursuit of creative and intellectual activity by secretly nursing a poetic vocation as a woman poet within the confines of her private feminine sphere. Like Virginia Woolf, she struggled to kill the male constructed repressive femininity, the “angel in the house” as her rite to passage as a woman writer. (To the Lighthouse).

However, women writers who had flouted the male-prescribed notion of feminine virtue and propriety and indulged in writing often faced the danger of losing their status as women in society. They were condemned by orthodox men as freakish, monstrous and unfeminine because creative energy was considered as a male trait. Critics like Gilbert and Gubar describe patriarchy’s historically unjust treatment meted out to nineteenth century women writers. They state that the “woman that ‘attempts the pen’” was considered “an intrusive and ‘presumptuous Creature,’” who “is absolutely unredeemable.” Accordingly, “… no virtue can outweigh the ‘fault’ of her presumption because she has grotesquely crossed boundaries dictated by Nature” (The
Dickinson’s struggle as a female poet can be seen in the context of a society that identifies woman writer with the negative images of woman “…the witch, the lesbian, the ravening beast, the monster, or the unsexed ‘thing.’” (McNeil 42).

Dickinson’s journey as a woman poet, therefore, had to pass through challenges, alienations, restrictions and disappointments. She subjected herself to a life of solitude by withdrawing from the male-centric society that imposed restrictions on the woman’s personal, religious and intellectual life. Her desire to be recognized as a poet is expressed time and often in her poems. One such instance is the poem given:

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me –

……………………………

For love of Her – Sweet – countrymen –

Judge tenderly – of Me (441, 1-2, 7-8)

Instead of receiving encouraging comments acknowledging the originality of her poetic talent, she has been criticized for “stylistic obscurities and formal irregularities” (Pollak 227). At times, she even neutralizes herself as “Nobody” to escape the scathing criticism of male critics and more than that she felt a genuine worry about involving her name in ways that might have brought embarrassment to her family. She 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. She is beggared of her identity by patriarchy to exist dully as “Somebody”.

Madwoman in the Attic 8).
Interestingly, one understands the poet’s nature as an introverted self that shuns publicity and fame:

How dreary – to be – Somebody!

How public – like a Frog –

To tell one’s name – the livelong June –

To an admiring Bog! (288, 5-8)

It is interesting to read and understand Dickinson’s aesthetic strategy as a poet. She had to adopt a protective camouflage in her repressive society to conceal her secret female poetic self: “When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person” (L 268). She assumed various roles and symbols as a child, woman, daughter, wife, bride, nun and daisy to resolve “both her anxieties about her art and her anger at female subordination” (Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic 583). As a woman poet, she had her own unique literary and aesthetic strategy to protest against the sexual discriminations against woman in the repressive nineteenth century patriarchal society. Her strategy is to reveal the truth of woman’s repressions covertly and without disclosing her identity as a woman poet to avert censure from the male-centric culture. Such an intention to write is seen in her poem: “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—/ Success in Circuit lies” (1129, 1-2)

Through her seemingly modest and feminine words, she strategically weaves poetry that closes the distance between appearance and reality. Therefore her poetry is considered as creation of words that “undercut by a steel blade of irony that transformed service into subversion and renunciation
into the ‘Royal Seal’ of the ‘White Election’” in the (forbidden) female poetic art. (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 587)

However, in the attempt to establish her self-defining female poetics in the male dominated literary domain, Dickinson suffered agonies far more serious than in any gothic thrill. Since strong ideas and high style was a masculine reserve, Dickinson stuck to writing like a woman within the strict genre expected of woman’s poetry. Her poems were personal lyrics characterized by “simplicity” and intellectual and stylistic “littleness” in keeping with the patriarchal definition of woman being “low” or “inferior” yet subtly associating little and small with great and powerful as is evident in “seeing bees as butterflies and butterflies as swans” to assert the repressed female self. (Bennett, *Emily Dickinson* 154). Through an extraordinarily complex series of maneuvers and poses, Dickinson enacted her own life in verse-drama giving it a fictional shape of gothic and romance. Her poetry as gothic “Yarn of Pearl” that gave her exactly the “Amplitude” and “Awe” she knew she needed in order to write great poetry. (605, 732).

Her poems are instances of poetry as biography. They enact her life as a woman as well as a woman poet in the disguise of the supposed person or persons or persona or personae. However, her enactments of different personae also reflect an individual life with a split personality. Several of her poems express her fears of madness and psychotic breakdowns in her poems and according to a feminist critic, John Cody, she did actually suffer from mental derailment. The verse below is an example of a split personality with psychic fragmentation:

    And Something’s odd – within –
That person that I was –
And this One – do not feel the same –
Could it be Madness – this? (410, 17-20)

Feminist critics also claim “Emily Dickinson became a madwoman… both ironically a madwoman (a deliberate impersonation of a madwoman) and truly a madwoman (a helpless agoraphobic, trapped in a room in her father’s house)” (Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic 583)

Emily Dickinson’s poetry is also an expression of her refutation of orthodox religious beliefs and becomes a repository of her views on nineteenth century puritanical theology. She found the orthodox patriarchal theology of nineteenth century New England to be hostile to woman. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff has rightly remarked: “…God and Mammon join forces in the smug cruelty that both legalized the subjection of women and declared it to be an affirmation of Divine Order” (“Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Task of Discovering a Usable Past” 636). Dickinson’s poems highlight patriarchal theology as a scheme to subjugate woman and create male supremacy. It destroys her self-esteem and renders her powerless, passive, dull and insignificant. In the following poem, one can view how she rejects the gendered religion by preferring to follow her own religion in her own private space “Home”: “Some keep the Sabbath – going to church/ I – keep it – staying at Home –” (324, 1-2). Her own religion is her poetic vocation, which she pursues in the privacy of her feminine sphere, “Home” away from stifling conventional theology that represses woman. Through her faith in poetry, she seeks autonomy and self-definition, which has been denied to her as a woman.
Taking a cue from Emily Dickinson’s own life, one could understand how religion affected her. From 1840-62, Amherst was shaken by evangelical fervor with religious revivals and hysterical rush for conversion. Even Dickinson’s family was not free from conversion drive. However, she was the only one who refused to convert. She wrote to one of her friends, Jane Humphrey, expressing her spiritual struggle against the madness of conversion—“Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves and trusts him, and I am standing alone in my rebellion….” (qtd. in Leder and Abbott 47). She wrestled with the fears of impiety, damnation and the anxiety of being a disobedient daughter but ultimately emerged stronger in her conviction to tread the unconventional path as a woman poet.

Dickinson rejected conventional dogmas as they discouraged woman’s assertion and autonomy by indoctrinating her with self-denial, suffering and subservience (to the dominant man) as the prerequisites for the bliss of salvation in the afterlife. They crush woman’s aspirations in higher pursuits of life by repressing femininity. Her poems reflect her subtle defiance and subversion of puritanical patriarchal religion that deny and suppress women. She refuted the orthodox Calvinist beliefs, especially the concept of the transcendent Sovereign male deity that created male hierarchies and excluded women from the cultural and literary traditions. In addition, Dickinson disclaimed the Bible as a projection of the manipulative male enterprise to usurp power and maintain dominance over women.

Dickinson’s rejection of religion seems to be based on its repressive control on women poets. The Amherst puritanical patriarchal culture of
nineteenth century was not conducive for the growth of women poets. Emily Dickinson herself experienced restrictions and disappointments to establish herself as a poet. Her attempts to gain recognition as a woman poet were frustrated by harsh criticisms from the so-called egoistic literary male critics. She refrained from publishing her poems during her lifetime after her initial attempt for publication of some of her poems (“Safe in their Alabaster Chambers”, “I’ll tell how the Sun rose”, “The nearest Dream recedes-unrealized”, “We play at paste”, etc) received negative criticisms. She rejected the professional advice of Higginson to regularize and conventionalize certain qualities in her verse.

Dickinson refused to revise her verse based on arbitrary standards, because it might jeopardize the originality and integrity of her verse. She defied society’s mental constriction that imposed cultural taboos to stunt women’s individualistic literary growth. She continued pursuing her poetic ambition on her own terms and wrote her poems relentlessly in her private sphere without bothering to gain self-definition as a woman poet in the male dominated literary realm. She resolved that she “would as soon undress in public, as give my [her] poems to the world” (qtd. in Pollak 229).

When Dickinson was alive, only a limited number of her poems were published anonymously. However, she approved none, as she was unhappy with the changes they had undergone. After her death, hundreds of manuscripts of her poems and letters were found stashed away in the drawers. Her younger sister Lavinia Dickinson sought the assistance of Mabel Loomis Todd, a young woman of literary aspirations and mistress of their brother, Austin Dickinson to publish her poems. Todd and Higginson initiated the first
posthumous publication of some of Emily Dickinson’s poems in 1890 and subsequently a succession of other publications ensued. However, to conform to the conventional literary standards, her poems were thoroughly edited and altered from their original form by adding titles, regularizing rhymes and changing punctuation both by Todd and Higginson and by her family members. It was only in 1955 that the definitive edition of Emily Dickinson’s poems in their original form, numbering 1775, edited by Thomas H. Johnson was published posthumously. The edition brought to light the poetic genius of Emily Dickinson.

Emily Dickinson’s contribution to American poetry in the light of recent feminist perspectives and interpretation is commendable. She heralded in mid-nineteenth century a new form of women’s writing that led to the development of a female literary subculture in the male-dominated literary culture of puritan America. In an age when feminism was dormant, her poems could present the subversion of patriarchal notions that formed the basis of an eloquent philosophy. She was like a guerilla warrior in her verse – defiant and unbending in her struggle for woman’s voice and autonomy against the patriarchal deity. As Albert Gelpi has rightly pointed out, Dickinson had silently demanded the liberation for women poets long before American society had reached such a point of liberation. This is evident in the “cloistered” and “isolated” life she led, shunning society and orthodox religion. It is interesting to read how she describes her choice of isolation through religious metaphors:

The Soul selects her own Society –

Then – shuts the Door –
To her Divine Majority –

Obtrude no more – (303, 1-4)

Unlike Thoreau’s “seclusion in the woods” which was “an interlude in an otherwise active life”, Dickinson’s solitude was a “virtue of necessity” as she was constrained in the patriarchal world. (Martin, An American Triptych 125). Subverting the ideal of the domesticated woman and converting the constricting female private sphere of submission and dependency into a haven for herself, she enjoyed a free play of her imagination and creativity, which she transcribed in her poetry. Emily Dickinson was an imagist poet even before imagist poetry gained popularity and her images of seclusion bring out her imaginative zeal:

That polar privacy

A soul admitted to itself –

Finite infinity. (1695, 6-8)

Nothing can describe better the idea of ‘loneliness’ as a ‘haven’ than the phrase “Finite Infinity”. Her choice to become a recluse reveals not only her defiance of the enforced constricting ideas of femininity, but also her love for poetry, for the sake of which she deliberately chooses to remain in “Finite infinity”.

Dickinson proudly claims her self-abnegation as a painful but privileged “virtue” that bestows her autonomy and poetic identity as a woman and as a woman poet in the male dominated literary sphere. In fact, her renunciation is her self-assertion in the male-centric culture:

Renunciation – is a piercing Virtue –

The letting go
A presence – for an Expectation – (745, 1-3)

Dickinson was known for dressing herself in white gown. The color white becomes a relevant symbol in her life as well as in her art. White represents her renunciation and tribulation as a gender-marked woman and also her divine poetic energy, “White Heat” that secured her recognition and self-definition in the male-centric world. (365). It is Dickinson’s “two-edged blade of light” that reflect both her “triumph and martyrdom” (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 615). Her triumph was her ability to practice the female poetic art amidst a constricting male-centric culture. Her unique choice of martyrdom is seen in her abstinence from the normal standards of life of marriage, womanhood and any significant event that people assess one’s “success” and “emotional fulfillment”(Wolfe, *Emily Dickinson* 167). Such a choice helped her to devote herself completely to her life in poetry.

Dickinson’s poetry can be read in the background of the female literary tradition of her fellow American women writers. Most of her contemporary women writers complied with the male-prescribed conventional literary style and cultural ideology that suppressed woman. Her American women peers like Lydia Huntley Sigourney, Helen Hunt Jackson to name a few, promoted their careers by writing verses on motherhood, death and nature. Typically conventional in style they “focus on the duties and obligations, the joys and sorrows, of domestic existence” (Bennett, *Emily Dickinson* 4).

Dickinson, however, stands apart from her American women of letters. She rather drew her inspirations from British women writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot and the Bronte sisters than from her
contemporaries. According to her, their works represent the most original and richest expression of the female literary tradition. She was full of admiration for the British women writers who had “expanded cultural definitions of how a woman could write” (Bennett, *Emily Dickinson* 15). In fact, Emily Dickinson herself underwent her “Conversion of Mind” after reading her favorite British poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem “Aurora Leigh”. She was able to transcend herself from the “small size” or restricted life of femininity by discarding the oppressive aspects of domestic ideology in her writing and thus could become a formidable woman poet in the male dominated literary world. Contrary to the sentimental poetry of her American peers who eulogized conventional womanhood, Dickinson’s poems condemn woman’s repressions and subtly establish woman’s autonomy and self-assertion from male dominance.

Unlike the women poets of her time, Dickinson deals with a woman’s viewpoint in order to question society’s definition of culture and theology under patriarchy that seeks to oppress and dehumanize woman. Her poems reflect the female poet’s dissatisfaction with the patriarchal suppression of woman in her times. This is observed in how she characterizes the male patriarch thus: “He put the belt around my life” (273, 1). One also traces in her poems the poet questioning the status quo of the puritan repressive culture of the nineteenth century. She criticizes patriarchal structures and institutions like family, religion and marriage, which discriminate woman as the weaker sex and thereby subject her to a life of subservience.

Several of Dickinson’s poems considered as ‘marriage poems’ explore women’s exploitation through the conventional institution of marriage. Leder
and Abbott point out that the leading intellectuals of the feminist movement like Pauline Wright Davis, described contemporary post marriage life for the women “as a living death” (134). Akin to the above opinion, Dickinson’s own experience of the marriages of her immediate family members reveals the subjugation of the married woman. Referring to her mother, she calls her a weak, ineffectual woman, who lived in awe and terror of her domineering husband. The marriage of her brother ended in failure with Austin Dickinson allegedly having an illicit affair with another woman, Mabel Loomis Todd. After marriage, women were reduced to insignificant subservient beings before the dominant men. According to the poet, the housewife loses her identity, autonomy, self-esteem and leads an oppressive life of inadequacy under the powerful husband. She becomes a domestic slave sacrificing her aspirations and talents, i.e., “Amplitude” and “Awe” to serve the “Requirement” of her husband:

She rose to His Requirement – dropt

The Playthings of Her Life

To take the honorable Work

Of Woman, and of Wife (732, 1-4)

Her poems portray the abject misery of the housewife who was annihilated with trivial duties as the enforced caretaker of her husband. She struggles to gain validation and ‘honor’ in the symbolic patriarchal system by her never-ending, devalued domesticity:

I tie my Hat – I crease my Shawl –

Life’s little duties do – precisely –

As the least
Were infinite – to me – (443, 1-4)

For Dickinson, marriage is an “unearthly transition” – a kind of death-in-life, for the woman. (Kirkby 76). Her wedding becomes her funeral: “Born – Bridalled – Shrouded” as she sacrifices her life for her husband. (1072,10). Through her poetry, she decries the domineering man and his hypocritical symbolic order and avows the power of the repressed housewife suggesting that the gender-marked woman, “the smallest Housewife” ensures the smooth functioning of his artificial world and thereby saves it from disintegration. (154).

Thus, Dickinson’s depressing study of married women suggests why she herself rejected marriage and remained a spinster till death rather than become the “wife forgotten” (L93). Instead of living a death like life as an insipid housewife to the militant man, she chose to devote her life to poetry and achieve autonomy and self-definition as a “Divine” woman poet: “Title Divine – is mine! / The Wife – without the Sign!” (1072, 1-2). The word “Divine” is suggestive of not only celibacy or divinity but also her aura as a secluded poet. Hence, even if the poet persona is a “Wife – without the Sign”, she is proud of her “Title Divine”.

Dickinson’s poems on sexual themes also explore the threat and denial of feminine sexuality on woman by the patriarchal man: “He stuns you by degrees –/ Prepares your brittle Nature/ For the Ethereal Blow” (315, 4-6). Her erotic poems speak about the woman’s repressed self in the context of phallocentric hierarchies. One of such poems is quoted thus: “Wild nights! Wild Nights! / Were I with thee” (249, 1-2).
To empower the repressed woman and her female sexuality, Dickinson subverts phallogocentrism (claiming the superiority of male sexuality)\(^3\) and asserts clitorocentricism\(^4\) claiming female sexual power as more pleasurable:

Come Slowly – Eden!
Lips unused to Thee –
Bashful – sip thy Jessamines –
As the fainting Bee – (211, 1-4)

Emily Dickinson’s poems reflect her “poetics of difference” (McNeil.30). As a woman poet, she writes of the female self to assert her own rights and thereby shatter the enforced “silence” and repression on woman that had been prevailing for centuries in the patriarchal world. Through poetry, she attempts to voice and utter a language of her own and thus seeks to gain autonomy and validation as a woman poet:

I’m ceded – I’ve stopped being Theirs –
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church

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

But this time – Adequate – Erect,
With will to choose – or to reject – (508, 1-3 17-18)

In fact, her choice of secretly penning thousands of poems is an act of writing the female self, which today’s feminist can identify as a quiet aesthetic revolution. It would be significant to point out that woman’s body and mind have been held as inferior or vulgar by the self-righteous male artists and were therefore forbidden to put them in literary texts. She articulated her subversive thought by becoming a woman poet and challenged the male governed
domains of speech. She rejuvenates the repressed female self as a new self-reliant person through renunciation and writing: “Mine – by the Right of the White Election!” (528, 1).

In her poems, she affirms feminine experience and female sexuality that were condemned and denied to women by the patriarchal culture and androcentric literary tradition. In the process, she invalidates the patriarchal construct of woman as object of desire and discourse or the body, which is the ‘other’ that is to be owned or possessed by man. According to McNeil, Dickinson’s voice has become “one of the ancestral voices informing the language of the womanly, for speech in life as well as in poetry” (36).

The nature and “difference” of her poems relates to the troubled and even tormented relationship to female identity. In fact, her poems constantly address specifically female problems of identity, fulfillment and freedom in relation to the orthodox conventions of the patriarchal culture. Dickinson’s poems are expressions of the pain to achieve self-definition as a woman artist, the lack of autonomy for woman’s self-assertion and the enforced stifling femininity, which condemns her to an inconsequential life of passivity, subservience and domestic slavery. Like all women writers, Dickinson experiences her own gender or female sexuality as a painful obstacle or even as an incapacitating inadequacy: “Amputate my freckled bosom! / Make me bearded like a man!” (1737, 3-4).

Dickinson’s poems deal with the humblest “familiar species” because the small, humble and domestic were associated with women’s realm/sphere:

From the familiar species

That perished by the Door –
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it – before – (448, 5-8)

She rescues the ignored and devalued feminized topic and transforms them into an invaluable womanly vision of female literary tradition that subjugated the exclusive male dominion in literature and creativity.

Emily Dickinson attempts to initiate a new unconventional poetic style to break the male hegemony in creative writing. This new style is based on the philosophy of inclusion and love in defiance of the exclusionary policy practiced against woman by patriarchy: “Like this consent of Language/This loved Philology” (1651, 15-16). It replaces the paternal logos or phallogocentrism that exclude the feminine. She rejects the patriarchal mode of discourse that tends to inscribe feminine identity as a mere appendage to male identity. With her new lexicon, she asserts her status as a woman writer and endeavors to alleviate the condition of woman in the repressive puritanical male-centric society.

The conventional poetic style and discourse that was based on patriarchal language restricted women writers to express their creativity in their true feminine way. In other words, woman’s voice or language was one of silence. Dickinson created her own poetic discourse in her art of poetry, writing her female self and exploring woman’s silence. McNeil has rightly claimed that Dickinson’s validation as a poet lies in the “written” becoming the “first flowering as womanly writing” (111).

Dickinson wrote her poems by developing her own original, unconventional lexicon and poetic style. According to Margaret Homans, her “greatest originality lies in her breaking out of the terms of gender altogether
in some of her poems” (Women Writers and Poetic Identity 209): “Me from Myself – to banish – / Had I Art –” (642, 1-2). Dickinson rejects the conventional poetic language based on sexual opposition and hierarchical divisions that overrate the masculine importance to suppress woman.

Dickinson wrote her poems in lyrical form, a genre, which 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 a “complex and highly elliptical syntactic structures of a sort not usually found in lyric” (McNeil 32). Male critics of the time including her mentor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson strongly reacted with harsh criticisms against her unconventional poetic style calling it “spasmodic”, “abominable”, “uncontrolled” and “dark”. Higginson even went to the extent of stating that Dickinson’s “verses are in most cases like poetry plucked up by the roots” (qtd. in Kirkby 137). However, Leder and Abbott attributed Dickinson’s poetic style to her distinctive poetic originality that made her stand out as an indomitable woman poet. They aptly reflected on how Jeanne Kammer regarded her “syntactic compression: her unusual juxtaposition of images: and her unconventional use of punctuation, capitalization, space and line” in her poems as “her aesthetics of silence” (qtd. in Leder and Abbott 189).

Dickinson’s poetic discourse, which had received harsh criticisms from male critics in her time, has now secured an indomitable place for women’s writing in the male-centric literary tradition. Helen Hunt Jackson, a fellow woman poet and staunch supporter of Dickinson has rightly praised her, “You
are a great poet – and it is wrong to the day you live in, you will not sing aloud.” (L 444a).

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 literary and social authority has long appealed to feminist critics, who consistently place her 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.

In keeping with the focus of the thesis on Dickinson’s poetry as the voice of the woman, the researcher attempts a critical survey of feminist criticism on Dickinson. Many feminist critics have explored her poems as an integral part of feminist studies. It would be significant to delve into some of the major critical overviews on her poetry to bring out the feminist strands in her poems. For instance, Adrienne Rich and Sandra M.Gilbert and Susan Gubar regard her poetic creation as the enraged and subversive power of the woman poet. According to Rich, Dickinson experiences herself “as a loaded gun” and “felt the lethal power of poetry for women” (Dickie 344). Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* regard Dickinson the centre 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 the society and her creativity, between the Angel in the House and the madwoman in the attic. (Dickie 344).

Margaret Homans in *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson* describes Dickinson’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 insight” on “the mother-daughter relationship”, and her refutation of her mother’s dreary fate of being an insipid subservient conventional woman by her choice of poetic art. Joanne Feit Diehl in *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination* 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). Susanne Juhasz, Paula Bennett, Joanne Dobson, Margaret Homans and Jane Eberwein examining Dickinson’s ways of evading and negotiating her cultural limitations upon her and her female sexuality, formulates a new feminist conception of a woman writer’s recourse to discourse, strategies, the poses and modes to transcend herself from the limitations of patriarchal culture. Howsoever, Dickinson’s poetry still has great potential for further feminist critical approaches and remains “central to feminist criticism in all stages of its development” (Dickie 342). The feminist ethos pervading her poetry has stimulated interest in the revolutionary nature of the female self.

The doctoral thesis entitled, “The Woman’s Voice: A Study of the Poems of Emily Dickinson”, aims to study the feminist ethos inherent in Emily Dickinson’s poetry. For this purpose, the researcher will analyze Dickinson’s selected poems. The proposed study will review major criticism on Dickinson especially the feminist interpretation of her poems since 1950s. The researcher will make use of biographical, formalist, feminist, and
interdisciplinary approaches to analyze her poems. Feminist theories of critics like Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Mary Wollstonecraft and Helen Cixous will be studied in relation to her poems in order to understand the power relationships that existed in her times and the female attitudes to patriarchal dominance in social and discursive matters.

The contents of the thesis would be organized in the following manner:

Chapter 1: Introduction
Chapter 2: Writing the Female Self
Chapter 3: View on Religion
Chapter 4: Marriage and Sex
Chapter 5: Woman as Writer
Chapter 6: Conclusion

While the introductory chapter highlights the salient features in Emily Dickinson’s poetry and its links to her life, the second chapter views her role as a writer, closely examining her poetry as articulation of the repressed woman’s self. The third chapter traces her views on religion and examines her rejection of religion for poetry, which goes into the revolutionary poetic zeal that characterizes her poems. The fourth chapter highlights Emily Dickinson’s views on marriage and sex from a close study of selected poems relevant to the subject. The fifth chapter views Emily Dickinson’s “anxiety of authorship” as a woman writer and her denial to compromise her female autonomy. The concluding chapter sums up the contents of the previous chapters and then discusses the conclusions of the research on Emily Dickinson. Then it also discusses Emily Dickinson’s contribution as a woman writer.