Chapter II
Writing the Female Self

In the essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, Helen Cixous writes that woman must shed her silence and repression and “write her self” to assert “… her own right, in every symbolic term, in every political process”. It is only then that a woman can reject the submissive self, constructed by “the militant male” subsequently affirming her autonomy and dignity. Cixous insists that a woman must break and destroy the “dark”\(^5\) that has been attributed to her and “put herself into the text – as into the world and into history” (347,351). To elaborate Cixous’s opinion, a woman must return to her body or in other words, to her female sexuality from which she has been violently driven off by the manipulative male. Hence, writing her self will help woman realize her natural and intrinsic relation to her sexuality and thereby provide strength to assert her 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. She chose the poetic vocation that was an exclusively male domain, “First – Poets – Then the Sun” (569). The very act of writing itself is an act of rebellion that challenged the New England Puritan norms. In writing her poems, Emily Dickinson 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.
This chapter will attempt to locate in Emily Dickinson’s poems the emergence of the female self and examine how her poems shatter the conventional notions of woman.

Any discussion of Dickinson’s poetry inevitably relates to her biography. One finds that the poet herself was a victim of gender discrimination. She suffered the pain of being sidelined as a daughter in her family home. She experienced her father’s open adoration and partiality for her brother, Austin, encouraging him in his intellectual pursuits over and above his own daughters. Dickinson’s father was practically indifferent to Emily Dickinson and discouraged her from any literary pursuits even though she exhibited greater talent and intellect than her brother. Besides, she was driven to a grueling life of household chores like the other womenfolk in the household. Her brother displayed the same male arrogance in his condescension towards Dickinson’s attempts at exalted literary style criticizing her poetic style of stylistic defects.

Dickinson’s poems are an attempt to recreate herself 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. They were confined within the domestic sphere of home, hearth and religion. Unlike men, women were denied entry into the public life of intellectual and artistic pursuits. Their female self and sexuality were considered “dark” and, therefore, taboo. Cixous has rightly stated that, “Muffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts” (356). Emily
Dickinson experienced the restricted and muffled life in her puritan background where she was instructed and expected to lead a subdued life in passivity, frailty and timidity in compliance with the male–inscribed propriety of womanhood. She found her intellectual and creative abilities stifled by the repressive norm. Emily Dickinson breaks the imposed silence, articulates her subversive thought in the only manner possible by challenging male articulations. 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. She envisions her reward for the “Delirious Charter” in the ultimate emancipation of woman:

Mine – there in Vision – and in Veto!

Mine – by the Grave’s Repeal –

Titled – Confirmed-

Delirious Charter!

Mine – along as Ages steal! (528, 5-9)

Dickinson refutes gender-determined roles and idealizations inscribed upon women by the male-centric society that has circumscribed their lives. According to her, the subordinate role of woman under the dominant man reduces her life to a mere subservient female. She finds such degrading roles and false femininity of self-denial and passivity as man’s clever designs to suppress woman and establish male sovereignty:

To hand our head – ostensibly –

And subsequent, to find

That such was not the posture

Of our immortal mind – (105, 1-4)
Marriage for Emily Dickinson was the male-sanctioned method of female repression and so she chose to remain singly, devoted to poetry. She preferred to lead an autonomous self-sufficient life as a woman poet than to become a repressed subservient housewife immersed in the drudgery of household chores. She chose to dress in the “woman – white” that was her private symbol of both renunciation from the trivial repressive life of conventional womanhood and self-confirmation for a definitive and adequate life as a woman writer.

Her poems symbolize the renunciation of the triviality and ordinariness of a woman’s life for something more powerful. According to Dickinson, such a choice of poetry over domesticity is more dignified and inclusive of all experiences:

A solemn thing – it was – I said –
A woman – white – to be –
And wear – if God should count me fit –
Her blameless mystery – (271, 1-4)

In the above poem, Dickinson’s “woman – white” is a paradoxical representation of her culture’s idealized image of woman as a secular bride or a religious nun. Through the cover of these conventional roles of woman, the poet persona leads her antithetical life in poetry in “blameless mystery” and averts social criticism. The unmarried speaker compares her unwed state to what she imagines bridal bliss would be and sneers those who would pity her. In other words, she assimilates the social role of woman to reject it and assert her repressed female self for an autonomous life in poetry:

A hallowed thing – to drop a life
Into the purple well –
Too plummetless – that it return –
Eternity until –
..............................................
And then – the size of this “small” life –
The Sages – call it small –
Swelled – like Horizons – my Vest –
And I sneered – softly – “small”!

(271, 5-8, 13-16)

Associating the “purple well” with the passionate female sexuality she claims its infinite, “plummetless” possibilities and power to empower her as an indomitable woman poet, and shatters the conventional notion of female as being inferior and forbidden. Having achieved a certain sense of self-sufficiency as a self-created woman poet, Dickinson envisions a life of uncircumscribed largeness. She mocks at the so-called “Sages” who are the supposed “male authorities, society’s standard-bearers” who “may have deemed her life ‘small’, incomplete, unworthy.” They believe that “she may need to dedicate herself to a groom or to a God in order to be whole, to be saved” (Falk 26).

In the transcendence of the woman to the articulate self as one experiences Dickinson as a poet, one perceives the self-assertion of a female persona who chose a life of poetry (an exclusive male dominion in her times), and who rejected the traditional roles of marriage, motherhood and religion inscribed upon woman by a puritan patriarchal society. To a woman like Dickinson the ordinary existence led by submissive woman is a death-in-life existence of subjugation and confinement to the “militant male”. She firmly
believes in the potency and emancipation of woman and chooses for her female soul a private world of poetry against the external male world, in order to nurture her female values and aspirations:

The Soul selects her own Society –

Then – shuts the Door –

To her divine Majority –

Present no more – (303, 1-4)

The verse quoted above, shows how Emily Dickinson considers this personal world as the only “Society” suitable for her in order to serve her needs and to empower her as a female poet. Shunning the social world of repressive femininity, she explores her poetic gifts in a personal world that is free of social scrutiny. She regards this world as being “divine” and affirms her difference to assert the power of the female self against the patriarchal “ambassadors of the external world’s glories, even emperors” of the symbolic world (Juhasz, *The Undiscovered Continent*. 15). Such a female self-assertion is experienced below:

Unmoved – she notes the Chariots – pausing –

At her low Gate –

Unmoved – an Emperor be kneeling

Upon her Mat – (303, 5-8)

She deliberately likens her “Unmoved” soul’s solitude to a simple house with feminine domestic images of “Door”, “low Gate” and “Mat” to avow her stance that the female self though regarded lowly stands powerful.

In Dickinson’s poetry, one perceives the rejection of the repressive patriarchal world for the self-confirmation of the autonomy of the female self:
I’m ceded – I’ve stopped being Theirs –

The name They dropped upon my face

…………………………………………

But this time – Adequate – Erect,

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

The above poem traces the female persona’s initial conflict and her later transcendence from the enforced submission and possession of her female self by the constricting patriarchal culture and religion to an independent conscious “Queen”. Rejecting the debilitating role of being a dependent and submissive daughter “crowing” on her “Father’s breast” and bearing her father’s name, she grows into a self-reliant powerful female self “Adequate – Erect –/ With will to choose – or to reject –”.

Dickinson’s renunciation of the patriarchal world symbolizes her privileging the power of being alive: “To be alive – is Power –” (677, 1). This is also evident in her letter written in 1870 where she says that: “I find ecstasy in living – the mere sense of living is joy enough” (L342a). In addition, her renunciation is her subtle affirmation of the infinite solitude of a woman’s inner space where she enjoys unrestricted opportunities and possibilities to liberate her repressed female self. She claims that the woman’s inner space is as profound and expansive as a “reduceless Mine” (855) and she can achieve an exhilaration of spirit that is intoxicatingly powerful.

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 women can transcend the cult of womanhood and that they can rejuvenate their repressed female selves in the very same private sphere within which they are 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 a larger or greater spiritual universe:

Exhilaration – is within –

There can be no Outer Wine

………………………………

The Soul achieves – Herself – (382, 1-2, 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)

The emergence of the transcendent female self leads to the upheaval of the dominant androcentric discourse of poetry and the creation of the female literary discourse. This may be seen in the difference that exists between her literary works and that of her male peers. Transcendentalists like Emerson and Whitman wrote about public life, war, politics and commerce celebrating masculine power. They dealt with the masculine tradition centering on the male self. According to Homans, Emerson relates man to “a strong subject exerting power over and internalizing everything he sees, or as he writes in Nature”. He places feminine with “‘all things’ and ‘the world’ not with the powerful self whose thought may be victorious” (“Oh, Vision of Language” 114). Whitman’s poems “expresses confidence in male agency, aggression and ultimate mastery”: “All the forces have been steadily employ’d to complete and delight me, / Now in this spot I stand with my robust soul” (“Song of Myself”). In language structures that is hierarchical and in which polarities of subject and object, self and other, presence and absence are freely present, woman is neither the source nor the center of power. Rather the woman and her feminine self remains the object or the other. She becomes a marginalized component of inferiority and exclusion, an absent entity in man’s main
discourse. Authority and dominance is reserved for man, and the masculine self is the subject present in all forms.

In contrast to the public discourse of male writers, Dickinson’s poems are about woman’s private life, domesticity and the feminine sphere that centers on woman. Unlike the masculine tradition that focuses on male self and excludes woman, Dickinson’s all-inclusive poetry centering on the female self universalizes the female self. In the poem, “I Dwell in Possibility” the term “Possibility” epitomizes poetry as an avenue for woman’s freedom and opportunity through female imagination, as opposed to the closure or rigidity of the external world of man symbolize by prose writings. Hence, she says poetry is “fairer House than Prose” as seen below:

I Dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – to Doors – (657, 1-4)

Emily Dickinson’s emphasis on female imagination and poetry rather than prose opens up a few critical discussions. Juhasz interprets, “This house is ‘Possibility’, the imagination. Dwelling there, the lady of the manor makes not cakes but poetry…, because of the power of the imagination, the housewife can be a poet” (The Undiscovered Continent 20). In the poem, she undertakes her journey of possibility through poetry in the closed chambers of her home away from society and its stifling restrictions. The public realm would have only been an obstacle to a woman’s attempt to establish an identity or connect to community, and hence poetry becomes an ‘Everlasting Roof” as seen in the following verse:
Of Chambers as the Cedars –

Impregnable of Eye –

And for an Everlasting Roof

The Gambrels of the Sky – (657, 5-8)

As Wendy Martin observes: “Home became increasingly important for Dickinson as a place [that] protected what she held sacred – friendship, love, nurturing values – from what she saw as the inflated importance of male business and political world” (An American Triptych 154). Her private feminine sphere becomes a privilege as it provides the necessary medium that opens the door of opportunity to show her the way to the “Gambrels of the Sky”. In other words, they represent the only channel to explore her poetic talent to make her possible to “gather paradise” as a self-defined empowered woman poet in the male-centric world. (657).

Her poems also signify subversion of the hierarchical structure of language that creates male dominance over the female. The woman poet reverses the rhetoric of dualism or polarity and revises the pattern of traditional relations between the sexes in her poems. As Homans rightly claims, “She uses that linguistic power first to reverse the ordinary direction of power between a feminine self and a masculine other, and then…uses it to discard the idea of dominance altogether” (Women Writers and Poetic Identity 201). She sets up the “conventional polarity” signifying “male-female relations” in her poems “in order to be collapsed” (Homans, “Oh, Vision of Language” 118). The poem, “The Daisy follows soft the Sun” represents female self that revises and nullifies the hierarchical polarity or dualism in the conventional literary discourse. (106). Using the two metaphors of sun and
daisy, Dickinson subverts the relations of power and powerlessness between the male self and the female self. The daisy represents the female self and the sun represents the male self in the following verse:

The Daisy follows soft the Sun –

And when his golden walk is done –

Sits shyly at his feet – (106, 1-3)

Initially, the sun is depicted as the powerful male self on whom the submissive female self “Daisy” depends upon. As the poem progresses, Dickinson’s toppling of hierarchies is seen in several ways. Initially, the singular daisy is transformed to the omnipresent “We”. Thus, the daisy becomes more powerful / infinite than the Sun as seen here: “We are the flower – Thou the Sun” (Homans. Women Writers and Poetic Identity 204). Moreover, the name “Daisy” itself makes her like the sun because daisy means “day’s eye”. In doing so, the woman poet equalizes power between the two sexes. Dickinson also pushes language to the limit where language’s meaninglessness and illusory nature is exposed. In the last three lines of the poem, Dickinson brings in the third metaphor, “Night’s possibility” that not only transcends the narrow conventional competition between the feminine daisy and the masculine sun but also elevates infinite potentials of the daisy in contrast to the finite nature of the sun. It represents “a possibility beyond the isolation of sexual characteristic… beyond communicable terminology” (Homans, Women Writers and Poetic Identity 204). In other words, the lines below open a transcendental space, where all hierarchies merge:

Enamored of the parting West-

The peace – the flight- the Amethyst-
Night’s Possibility (106, 10-12)

Further, Dickinson’s poems are unique in their poetic objection to hierarchies. The assimilation of the masculine self, the “animus” and the feminine self, the “anima” in her female psyche is a subtle objection of the sexual division in masculine literary discourse that reflect woman as passive and submissive “object” or “other” and man as the superior and powerful “subject”. She refutes such hierarchical structure of language as socio-political myth and claims equality between man and woman challenging the symbolic male-centric world:

He was weak, and I was strong – then –

So He let me lead him in –

I was weak, and He was strong then –

So I let him lead me – Home.

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Neither – was strongest – now –

He strove – and I strove – too – (190, 1-4, 11-12)

At times, in some of her poems she defiantly breaks out of the boundaries of gender and describes her female mind as “itself” thereby emphasizing female autonomy and rendering obsolete the patriarchal hierarchical structure of language: “Itself – it’s Sovereign – of itself / The Soul should stand in Awe –” (683, 7-8).

Thus, 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 transcendental female self not only confines to the transcendental self alone, but also evolves and emerges as a unique sexual voice. This is evident in her expressions of the sexual self to articulate the repressed female body.

In the patriarchal world, man regards his body as being superior since he thinks of it “as a direct and normal connection to the world”, whereas he regards “the female body as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it” (Beauvoir 15). In defiance of such labels used against the female body, Dickinson’s poetry depicts the glorification of the female body as the catalyst that releases the mysteries of nature as well as the mystical powers in woman’s nature engendering and nurturing life:

So from the mould
Scarlet and Gold
Many a Bulb will rise – (66, 1-3)

In the above poem, using nature imagery the woman poet expresses the greatness of the female body and it’s amazing creativity that results in the birth of precious lives, “Scarlet and Gold / Many a Bulb will rise –”. Her assertion of the power of the female body as the life-source and a representation of the mysteries of nature shatters male’s self-proclaimed power and superiority over female body. Simultaneously, her claim for the female body’s power establishes the emancipation of the repressed female self from male dominance.

Further, in the poem, “The Moon was but a Chin of Gold”, the female body assumes a larger than life magnitude. (737). Dickinson extends the horizons of the metaphor of the female body with her parallel between the
woman’s garb and the cosmos. She invests the female body with the figures and breadth of plenitude:

Her Bonnet is the Firmament –

The Universe – Her Shoe –

The Stars – the Trinkets at Her Belt –

Her Dimities – of Blue – (737, 17-20)

Dickinson’s writing of the female body is also an act of writing her female self in two ways. Firstly, it gives a personal dimension of the woman’s self and female sexuality. Secondly, it helps to subvert the patriarchal discourse. Man has always proclaimed the supremacy of the phallus and male writers have felt free to glorify their sex identifying their phallus with pens as observed by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. On the other hand, man condemned female sexuality as forbidden and unmentionable. They separated woman from her own sexuality having been reduced to guilt and shame about her own sexuality. She has been excluded from the literary domain because her female sexuality has been declared to be lacking the power and aggressiveness of the phallus to create literary works.

Dickinson’s writing the female self can be seen also from 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” 236). Writing of the forbidden and repressed female sexuality through sexual images like “pea” within the “Pod” and “Forbidden Fruit” also expressing woman’s conscious or unconscious
awareness of her sexual power are some of the examples of Dickinson’s emergence as a strong woman poet inscribing the female self:

Forbidden Fruit a flavor has
That lawful Orchards mocks –
How luscious lies within the Pod
The Pea that Duty locks – (1377, 1-4)

Emily Dickinson’s erotic sexual imagery in her homoerotic and autoerotic poetry shatters the false notions of womanhood inscribed on woman and voices the silenced female erotic desire:

Come slowly – Eden!
Lips unused to Thee –
Bashful – sip thy Jessamines –
As the fainting Bee –

Enters – and is lost in balms. (211, 1-4, 8)

She expresses the persona’s female sexual desire through the homoerotic or autoerotic mode and claims her immense fascination for the subject of female sexuality as reflected in the above poem. She represents the overwhelming female experience of sheer physical delight in losing oneself in “balms”. She experiences entering a paradise of warmth, honey and balm in a female-centered eroticism in her presumably fantasized sexual relation with women:

Syllables of Velvet –
Sentences of Plush –
Depths of Ruby, undrained –
Hid, Lip, for Thee –

Play it were a Humming Bird –

And just sipped – me – (334, 3-8)

The poet speaker in the poem enthralls her female companion by offering her sexuality as mentioned in “Depths of Ruby” and “Lip, for Thee”. Such fantasizing reveals her rejection of heterosexual relationship that is based on contest for power. At the same time, the autoerotic mode of the female sexual experience in the above poem takes the persona’s love for poetry from a sexual level to an artistic level, where the poet persona’s imagined eroticism stimulates her poetic impulses. Hence, it is obvious that the poet’s act of writing the female self emphasizes the importance of the sexual self to sustain the poetic self.

Dickinson’s woman-centered erotic poems validate female sexuality and female creativity as autonomous and powerful alternatives in literary discourse challenging male sexuality and male creativity. To her, male sexuality is a masculine power, which annihilates woman. It is to her a noon that scorches woman and “destroyed [destroys] their [her] will, it was [is] a plenty that hurt, a vulture that lapped [laps] up navies, a Tiger uneased [unease] by crumbs of blood, a frost that killed[kills]”. On the other hand, female sexuality has “the power to feed and nourish her even when she thought [thinks] herself deprived” (Bennett, Emily Dickinson 180):

As the Starved Maelstrom Laps the Navies

As the Vulture teased

Forces the Broods in Lonely Valleys

As the Tiger eased
By but a Crumb of Blood, fasts Scarlet

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I, of a finer Famine
Deem my Supper dry
For but a Berry of Domingo
And a Torrid Eye – (872, 1-5, 13-16)

The clitoral symbolism that Dickinson has used here, affirms the absolute autonomy and power of female sexuality. Clitoris is the female sexual organ known as an object only for pleasure. According to Bennett, nineteenth century gynecologists like Charles Meigs were aware of the clitoris as the “prime seat” of female erotic sensibility but the knowledge was suppressed. She also said that Ellen Moers in Literary Women mentions “the little hard nut” in discussing the metaphors of women writers including Dickinson but never identified it being as being specifically as clitoral. (Emily Dickinson 172).

Bennett further states that feminist theorists have maintained a singular silence regarding this organ because of the influence of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan (Bennett, “Critical” 237). However, even during the time when discourse on sex was not as public as it would be later on, Dickinson succeeded in crushing the censors and snares of silence on this female organ and depicted it metaphorically, subtly transferring the female self beyond the ultimate reserve discourse. Her poetry expresses the belief that with the clitoris, women could become sexual subjects in their own right, taking their own sexual, social, creative and political power in their own hand. Here writing the female self goes beyond the mind to writing the body:
I wonder how the Rich – may feel –

An Indiamen – An Earl –

I deem that I – with but a Crumb –

Am Sovereign of them all – (791, 13-16)

In the poem, “Crisis is sweet and yet the Heart”, Dickinson employs the image of the flower to represent the clitoris as “rescinded Bud” and claims the power of female sexuality in providing sexual pleasure without the consummation of marriage, thereby deflating the power of male sexuality:

Inquire of the closing Rose
Which rapture she preferred
And she will point you sighing
To her rescinded Bud (1416, 5-8)

The “closing Rose[‘s]” preference for “rapture” of the “rescinded Bud” signifies the woman poet’s preference for female-centered eroticism or clitorocentricism against the so-called fulfilled sex of marital intercourse. Thus, Emily Dickinson replaces the phallocentric discourse that disempowers the woman poet with her paradoxical clitorocentrism.

As seen so far, Dickinson privileges female bonding and homosexual relationship over repressive heterosexuality. Patriarchy encouraged male bonding to consolidate man’s power but discouraged female bonding as man regarded it as a threat to his dominance. This is evident in the feminist critic, Nina Auerbach’s observation:

[I]initiation into a band of brothers is a traditional privilege symbolized by uniforms, rituals, and fiercely shared loyalties; but sisterhood … looks often like a blank exclusion. A
community of women may suggest less the honor of fellowship
than an antisociety, an austere banishment from both social
power and biological rewards. (qtd. in Pollak 147)

Dickinson’s defiance reveals the emergence of an aggressive female
self who refuses to be repressed with such oppressive discriminations. By
forging friendship with women, she asserts the sovereignty and self-definition
of her female self, incurring the risk of being alienated from the symbolic
world as being unwomanly, aggressive, condemning her as monster, witch or
“daemon”.

One could perceive the woman poet’s affirmation for such female
bonding in her reference to the texts of women writers like Elizabeth Barrett
Browning, George Eliot and the Bronte sisters with whom she identified as a
woman writer and believed they had the power to confer identity on her as a
woman poet:

I think I was enchanted
When first a somber Girl –
I read that Foreign Lady –
The Dark – felt beautiful – (593, 1-4)

In some of her letters, she employs the conventional terms of male
power and female powerlessness to expose the dangers of losing her female
self in the overwhelming superiority of maleness:

Oh, did I offend it – [Did’nt it want me to tell the truth] Daisy –
Daisy – offend it – who bends her smaller life to his (it’s)
meeker (lower) every day – who only asks – a task – [who]
something to do for love of it – some little way she cannot
guess to make that master glad. ([L, 391] qtd. in Bennett, *Emily Dickinson* 158). 

Her poems reveal that the woman-centered relationship and discourse are nurtured on values of equality and mutuality and removes the hierarchical polarities, differences and discriminations existing in man-woman relationship. She expresses that female bonding is a lifetime relationship of give and take that provides satiety and strength to women: “Without a formula we fought / Each was to each the Pink Redoubt –” (1529, 7-8).

Further, what one infers from Dickinson’s poems is that, unlike in a heterosexual hierarchical relationship, women in female bonding enjoy equal status and camaraderie. She represents the love or bond between women as a “modest lot”, a love of “equality and mutual nurturance” (Bennett, *Emily Dickinson* 164):

> A little bread – a crust – a crumb,
> A little trust – a demijohn –
> Can keep the soul alive –
> Not portly, mind! but breathing – warm –
> ........................................
> A modest lot – A fame petite,
> A brief Campaign of sting and sweet
> Is plenty! Is enough! (159, 1-4, 7-9)

The above poem based on homosexuality eulogizes the solidarity, equality, mutuality and nurturance between women in female bonding. Even though it’s a love or bond based on smallness and minimalism as indicated by the terms “a little bread”, “crust”, “crumb”, “a little trust” “modest” and “petite”, the
poet claims it as fulfilling, secure and complete: “Is plenty, is enough”. It is a 
life of love and sharing of the simple pleasures of domesticity between 
women, “…the flowers and bees, the bread women bake, the demijohns of 
home-made wine they enjoy together” amidst “sting and sweet” (Bennett, 
Emily Dickinson 164). Dickinson too, in her friendship with other women such 
as Susan, Mrs. Bowles, the Norcross cousins and her sister Vinnie enjoyed 
such bliss of female bonding. Through her friendship or romantic bonding 
with other women like her own supportive sister Lavina, her sister-in-law, 
Susan Gilbert Dickinson and her friends Abiah Root, Kate Scott Anthon and 
Helen Hunt Jackson, Dickinson enhances her self-confidence and protects 
herself against the threat of patriarchy. Such an expression of pleasure in 
female bonding or camaraderie is found in the following poem:

Somebody run to the great gate
And see if Dollie’s coming! Wait!
I hear her feet upon the stair!
Death wont hurt – now Dollie’s here! (158, 9-12)

Dickinson’s writing the female self is also a revolutionary act that 
vehemently opposes female subjugation. Several of her poems portray her 
refutation of the humiliating subservient life enforced on woman in the 
oppressive patriarchal culture and her assertion of the true invincible power of 
female self. Such an affirmation can be read here:

To hang our head – ostensibly –
And subsequent, to find
That such was not the posture
Of our immortal mind –
Affords the sly presumption

That in so dense a fuzz –

You – too – take Cobwebs attitudes

Upon a plane of Gauze! (105, 1-8)

In the above poem, the poetic persona salvages the inherent “immortal “power and worth of her female mind that has been denied to her and attempts to claim her deserved dignity and space in the male-centric world. She considers life itself as “dense fuzz,” a “plane of Gauze”, which means nothing is fixed or clear, including gender positions. Just as woman is forced to wear the mask of submission and humiliation, man also feigns himself and wears the mask to hide his true self. Therefore, the woman persona insists that woman should empower herself by discarding the “Cobweb’s attitudes” of passivity and subservience as they are socio-political myths woven by the manipulative male mind to suppress her.

Through her poems, Dickinson explores gender discrimination experienced by woman in the male-centric culture and represents woman’s revolt against repression. She exposes the excruciating humiliation, which the woman suffered – how she is not only demeaned and impoverished with indifference but is repressed and silenced with a maze of patriarchal constraints:

I was the slightest in the House –

I took the smallest Room –

At night, my little Lamp, and Book –

And one Geranium (486, 1-4)
The poem relates the lowly life enforced on women where she is confined to the “smallest” room with meager provisions – a “little” lamp, a book and a plain geranium flower. She is being repressed and humiliated with patriarchal conventions.

Her poetry challenges conventional notions of woman as being inferior through not only subtle and mind-blowing diatribes, but most significantly by exalting the inexhaustible and incredible power of woman’s creative mind that can never be destroyed or maimed by any enormity of physical or psychological repression:

Still! Could themselves have peeped –
And seen my Brain – go round –
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason – in the Pound – (613, 5-8)

Drawing a comparison to the inherent and incorruptible wildness of the bird, the Amherst woman poet claims that the power of the female imagination has the ability to retain its freedom even in “Captivity”, if not literally, then always in the spirit. For her “Captivity” in “prosy life” of domestic slavery in the constricting patriarchal world is an escapable imprisonment like that of a bird locked away in a cage. The “bird can fly off, just as the poet can fly, through poetry, through art, and transcend a life of ‘prose’. Indeed, they both can escape ‘easy as a Star,’ as if in some sense both bird and poet become stars themselves, suns of their own” (Barker 114):

And easy as a Star
Abolish his Captivity –
And laugh – No more have I – (613, 10-12)
The above verse reminds us of Cixous’s observance of flying as a gesture of woman “flying in language and making it fly” (356). Acknowledging the indomitable female spirit of Dickinson, Gilbert has aptly remarked: “To this wayward nun, as to all winged things, walls and fences pose no problems: she frets not at the convent walls of language because she knows she can leap over them into windows whenever she wants” (“The Wayward Nun Beneath the Hill” 40).

In the context of the above discussion, it would be significant to probe Dickinson’s use of bird imagery. Wendy Barker aptly relates her practice to Ellen Moers’ observation that “female writers often use birds as metaphors for their own sex, partly, she conjectures, because they are little and often victims, but also because they are beautiful and exotic and because they sing” (qtd. in Barker 124). Dickinson’s letter to her cousin, Louise Norcross, also substantiates this theory: “It’s a great thing to be ‘great’, Loo, and you and I might tug for a life, and never accomplish it, but no one can stop our looking on, and you know some cannot sing, but the orchard is full of birds, and we all can listen. What if we learn, ourselves, some day!” (qtd. in Barker 124). Thus, one can safely conclude that Dickinson’s bird imagery is her effective way of representing the emancipation and self-assertion of the repressed female self.

In portraying the enormity of repression of the female self, Dickinson challenges the status quo. In the process of such a portrayal, she brings to light the invincible strength and power of woman particularly that of the woman writer to assimilate the pain of repression and skillfully integrate it for her growth and development. This approach could be identified when one reads the following lines:
And Yet the largest Woman’s Heart
Could hold an Arrow – too –
And so, instructed by my own,
I, tenderer, turn Me to. (309, 3-6)

Dickinson herself had endured and assimilated the painful self-denial or renunciation to establish herself as a woman poet. To overcome the oppressive and restricted conditions of patriarchy, she tends to become a hermit intellectually: “How powerful the Stimulus / Of an Hermetic Mind –” (711, 7-8). The “Hermetic Mind” of the poet helps her create a positive energy in her poetry. This can be identified in her notion of and belief in woman’s empowerment despite oppression. Refuting the “dark” or the enforced attribute of “dark” (inferior) on woman, Dickinson ascribes her self-assertion as a female self to her ability to identify with “…Races – nurtured in the Dark” in the feminine darkness. (581, 5). She revokes the debilitating quality of “dark” and transforms it as a powerful, positive female creative energy and medium that enabled her to transcend the old polarities that weakened woman. In fact, she makes a revision of the old, constricting hierarchical polarities by residing in her own premises, “dark”: “A Spider sewed at Night/ Without a Light/ Upon an Arc of White” (1138, 1-3). For instance in the poem, one perceives the identification of the spider spinning its web in the dark with the woman poet writing poetry in the feminine darkness, “Night” guided by her intense female creative energy, “Arc of White”.

Dickinson expressed her appreciation of Elizabeth Barrett Browning who inspired her to see that the dark could also be beautiful: “I read that Foreign Lady –/ The Dark – felt beautiful” (593, 3-4). Dickinson sees this
darkness as feminine inspirational influence in woman-centered poems. She subverts the patriarchal images of man – the day, and affirms the conventional female images – the night, dark and its forces as being liberating and empowering objects of woman. For instance, in the poem, “The Daisy follows soft the Sun”, the woman, “Daisy” opts for the night to empower her repressed self against the patriarchal sun. She regards the night as the feminine inspirational influence to her creative energy and envisions the possibility of an emancipated life as a woman poet:

Enamored of the parting West –

The peace – the flight – the Amythyst –

Night’s possibility! (106, 10-12)

This is reminiscent of Dickinson’s own repressive life of engaging in household chores during the day and writing poetry in the night within the confines of her room.

In some of her poems, Dickinson boldly shatters the stifling male-constructed idealized notion of “true womanhood” that suppresses the innate strength of woman in order to reduce her to a subservient self. She ridicules it and seeks affirmation of the repressed female self by retrieving her strength in the “dark”. She defiantly declares in metaphorical terms that by gaining her strength from the feminine “dark”, the female self will be able to confront and defeat the so-called oppressive power of the masculine:

If night stands first – then noon

To gird us for the sun,

What Gaze!

When from a thousand skies
Dickinson’s poems also signify the resurgence of the female self through female images of earth or Nature that consistently rise to triumphant heights in the twilight darkness. They swell to incredible proportions by the dusk, emerging as powerful goddesses. Relating to the traditional association of woman and nature, Dickinson identifies woman with the formidable virtues of Nature such as truth, steadfastness and fortitude to assert woman’s power:

Sweet Mountains – Ye tell Me no lie –
Never deny Me – Never fly –
Those same unvarying Eyes
Turn on Me – when I fail – or feign,
Or take the Royal names in vain –
Their far – slow – Violet Gaze –
My Strong Madonnas – Cherish still – (722, 1-7)

In this poem, she mentions the dusk or twilight, which also connotes to the female “dark” that Dickinson defiantly identifies with the feminine light that is the kindlier light for creative woman. Hence, she visualizes “a light that she, in effect, creates herself, from long nurturing in the dark” (Barker 29). It replaces the male sun’s destructive power that is constraining and judgmental. Through this light, the repressed self can experience harmony and transcendence as a triumphant woman poet:

The Wayward Nun – beneath the Hill –
Whose service – is to You –
Her latest Worship – When the Day
Fades from the Firmament away – 
To lift Her Brows on You – (722, 8-12)

In the above poem, Dickinson’s description of twilight becomes intrinsic for woman’s empowerment. The masculine deity is finally and blessedly silent so that the poet, as a rebellious spinster, can commune with her own nature’s feminine goddesses to nurture her poetic imagination. Gilbert and Gubar call these maternal deities as “sisters of that mother Awe to whom, Dickinson told Higginson, she ran home as a child, and surely it was such mothers who enabled (and empowered) this poet to escape her Nobodaddy’s requirements, if only in secret” (The Madwoman in the Attic 647).

In her rejection of patriarchal repression and repugnance of forces that block female autonomy, Dickinson’s poetry reveals the emergence of an aggressive female self, refusing female subordination to man and more significantly upholding the female power and supremacy. According to feminist critics, a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic and threatens to explode the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the “truth” with laughter. Her poems express the power of female texts created by female sexual energy emerging from the “dark”, “silence” that can effortlessly “ooze away” the constricting patriarchal structures or “Cities”:

A still – Volcano – Life –
That flickered in the night –
………………………………….
Whose hissing Corals part – and shut –
And Cities – ooze away – (601, 1-2,11-12)
Further, Dickinson’s poems reveal a fiery inwardness, a feeling of dissatisfaction that underlies the seeming calmness of the repressed woman. This is expressed in oxymoronic form: “A still- Volcano – Life”/ “A quiet – Earthquake Style”/ “The Solemn- Torrid – Symbol”, indicating the repressed woman as “calm and volcanic, harmless and threatening, sober and fiery” (Freitas. “Dickinson’s A Still – Volcano – Life”). The metaphor of volcanic life is the definition of the woman’s self – the private, fiery self – as being a prisoner of social forces, which is potentially destructive and the public self that poses as socially contained. The reticent volcano is the subversive female fury. It stands for the female self, the writing and the woman.

The spatial volcanic imagery expresses the imprisonment of nineteenth century woman: the confinement of the female self in a patriarchal home, the patriarchal culture and the codes of masculine expression and ideology. Simultaneously, it also carries the explosive threat of escape and through it an apt response to the social attempt to reduce female feeling to “a domestic hearth (that) warms but does not threaten” (Dobson 107). She transforms herself to a “human inhuman volcano as deadly as the loaded gun, an unmistakably female and violently sexual Vesuvius” (Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic 611):

The Solemn – Torrid – Symbol –

The lips that never lie –

Whose hissing Corals part – and shut –

And Cities – ooze away – (601, 8-12)

Through the phrase “lips that never lie”, the lips of a verbal and sexual power that burst truthfully into an explosive speech, she shatters the established order
and reveals her female self’s true identity despite the risk of losing its social existence. Gilbert and Gubar aptly remark, “[H]er own mouth appears as a ‘hideous wound’ bleeding ‘in silence and in secret’, and thus strives for ‘a voice to speak her dread’” (The Madwoman in the Attic 44)

A strong female creative energy emerges out of the undaunted female self that seeks autonomy. Adrienne Rich characterizes it as “daemon” dangerously lurking in the female consciousness. Such depictions reveal the poet’s focus on the painful and dangerous struggles of woman, particularly the woman writer – “split between a publicly acceptable persona” and the “possibly unacceptable persona” – in the repressive male-centric world. (Rich 67). In the poem, “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun”, Dickinson enacts the dangers and risks that a woman poet has to incur in her struggle to recreate and empower her female poetic self. Perceiving herself as a lethal weapon – “a Loaded Gun”, she acts as a dangerous and destructive female power nurtured by her aggressive creative energy:

My life had stood – a Loaded Gun
In Corners – till a Day
The Owner passed – identified –
And carried Me away –
And now We roam in Sovereign Woods –
And now We hunt the Doe –
And every time I speak for Him –
The Mountains straight reply – (754, 1-8)

The emergence of the new autonomous female self can be seen in two of its components - the conventional passive feminine self, “the Doe”, and the
masculine self characterized by the aggressive creative energy, the “Gun”.
According to Cixous, this female self is the expression of the split persona – riveted between the two extremes of “Medusa” (masculine self) and the “abyss” (feminine self). (354) To assert her self as a woman poet, she must hunt and kill the conventional subservient feminine, the “Doe” or Virginia Woolf’s “angel” by summoning her “daemon”, the aggressive creative energy, the masculine “Gun” that resides in the female consciousness. In the process, she partakes of the power and autonomy of the privileged male: “And now We roam in Sovereign Woods”. After her self-assertion, she revels in her new found sovereignty and power that obliterates the hostile patriarchal environment:

And do I smile, such cordial light

Upon the Valley glow –

It is as a Vesuvian face

Had let its pleasure through – (754, 9-12)

However, the poet’s aggressive energy and rage has its dangerous repercussions as it not only has the potency for securing her autonomy but it also carries the risks and dangers of the destruction of womanliness. This is also evident from the gun image as the “power to kill”. In other words, aggression is also destructive. Bennett rightly states: “Speaking through the voice of a gun, Dickinson presents herself in this poem as everything ’woman’ is not; cruel not pleasant, hard not soft, emphatic not weak, one who kills not one who nurtures” (On 754[“My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun”]):

To foe of His – I’m deadly foe –

None stir the second time –
One whom I lay a Yellow Eye –

Or and Emphatic Thumb – (754, 17-20)

Thus, it is through the excruciating mutation of her female self, annihilating her femininity, even perhaps her humanity that the woman, particularly the woman poet affirms her female self and achieves immortality in her art or verse: “For I have but the power to kill,/ Without – the power to die –” (754, 23-24).

Conversely, through this poem, Dickinson also challenges the treacherous male ideology as perceived by Simone De Beauvoir that “superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic 610)

Thus, through her description of the female self, Dickinson transcends the conventional notions of womanhood normally perceived in New England. Writing within the confines of the repressive society this female poet with her emphasis on woman’s autonomy explodes the patriarchal discourse on the female 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.