Chapter III

View of Religion

Religion has been perceived by feminist critics and writers as creating gender bias and greatly influencing misogyny and androcentricism. Feminist philosophy of religion points out that the envisioning of the supreme divine as absolute subject and named Father has been the origin and justification of hierarchical domination of man against woman. In ways both implicit and explicit, this has tended to validate the social and political structures of patriarchy that exalt the suppression and oppression of women by terming them as inferior and weak. The discursive practices that construct the divine as male has also been intimately related to the production of ideologies, which devalue women and form a constitutive element in the oppression of women. To Emily Dickinson, the orthodox puritanical religion was a male-created “embodiment of patriarchal power” designed to suppress female power and render women helpless. (Ostriker 66). Through her poems, she challenges the orthodoxy of Puritanism, especially the concept of the transcendent sovereign male deity that creates male hierarchies and excludes woman from cultural and literary traditions.

Dickinson also deplores the American concept of the sentimentalized or “feminized” God, which defends patriarchal norms and supplements the puritanical male authority as God, our loving Father. (Bennett, Emily Dickinson 53). Exploring the key ideas in her religious poetry such as death, immortality, and nature of God, she passionately protests against the misogynist values that androcentric religion encodes. She condemns the constricting feminine values of self-denial, domesticity, submissiveness that
orthodox religion upholds to deny woman’s freedom. In fact, women are compelled to serve men as gods and are driven to lead a subservient oppressive life. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a prominent activist of the Women’s Suffragist Movement of America in Dickinson’s time, aptly states that the word of God is the word of man to subjugate women and hinder their emancipation. Dickinson’s poems recount the painful sufferings, alienation, injustice and exclusion that religious orthodoxy subjects woman to. This chapter would endeavor to explore her views on religion in her poems from a feminist perspective and substantiate the above contentions.

From an early age, Dickinson disapproved the spirit of puritanical fervor that swept New England during her time. In her private letters, to Higginson, she ridicules the family religiosity that pervaded every New England household: “They are all religious – except me – and address an Eclipse, every morning – whom they call their ‘Father’” (L 261). During her stay in Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary, she was against its evangelical spirit and refused to undergo conversion. Such conversion upholds political patriarchy, where the woman is trained to sacrifice herself to the militant male with the “domestic code of ‘service to others’”. (Bennett, Emily Dickinson 8). It restricts a woman’s world to domesticity and motherhood and this is evident in (Mary Lyon’s (founder of Mt. Holyoke Seminary) letter to Dickinson’s mother quoted by Bennett – “O how immensely important is this work of preparing the daughters of the land to be good mothers!” (7).

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

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church

I keep it, staying at Home –

With a Bobolink for a Chorister –

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

Through the woman persona, Dickinson expresses her delight in writing poetry where she experiences the presence of the divine in her muses i.e. the objects of nature. The sweet chirping of the “Bobolink” provides her heavenly hymns of a choir and the “Orchard” that surrounds her with the sanctity of the church, far surpasses (in its holiness and genuineness) the artificial male-centric religion that neglects woman. Thus, the feminist critic, Betina Knapp aptly states that Dickinson rejected the “organized religion even while retaining her deep faith in God” (67). The woman poet holds communion with God, the “noted clergyman” through the beautiful natural world and experiences the glories of heaven on earth “all along”:

God preaches, a noted Clergyman –

And the sermon is never long,

So instead of going to Heaven, at last –

I’m going, all along. (324, 9-12)

In her preference to heavenly earth, Dickinson also subverts the patriarchal Calvinist doctrine of afterlife in “Heaven”.
Dickinson’s denial of the Calvinist faith pertains to her own suffering as a woman poet as a result of its constricting norms that deny identity and self-definition to the woman poet. Patriarchal orthodox theology indirectly endorses male subjugation of the female by regarding woman as the weaker and inferior sex incapable of higher intellectual and creative pursuits of life – “Hee for God only, shee for God in him” ([PL 4. 299] qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic 582). Moreover, its manipulated ideology of femininity such as docility, domesticity and self-denial cripples woman’s existence.

Dickinson is also against the grand compensatory Calvinist redemptive theory that represses woman by encouraging her to lead a life of pain and subservience with the promise of reward for everlasting bliss after death and of salvation in “Heaven”. Bennett aptly remarks: “Never, perhaps, in the history of Christianity was the promise of life – after – death employed so cavalierly or so popularly to deny the reality of pain, the intractable Being-ness of suffering, evil and loss, and never, as a result, had so many people assured that they too would make it into heaven” (Emily Dickinson 57). This is also evident in Martin’s statement: “…the Puritans considered suffering and self-abnegation a sign of testing by God and the capacity to sustain this suffering a sign of moral strength, even triumph….” She also states that the “triumphant suffering is described by Gilbert and Gubar as ‘Strength in Agony’ and, according to this formula, women prove their strength by bearing extraordinary emotional burdens without complaint” (An American Triptych 102). The woman poet condemns such oppressive orthodoxy that endorses suffering in women by reversing the meaning of life and death: “Paralysis –
The poet very effectively juxtaposes opposites and refers to “Paralysis” as the constrictions of life on earth and “Vitality” as a freer life after death in order to ridicule and undermine such hollow theological norms.Protesting vehemently against such exploitive religious practices and taking Christ as her aid, Dickinson pronounces, “Death was dead”, not salvation. She offers a “corrective for this ‘liberalized’ religion” and its “vogue for posthumous comfort” (Loeffeholz 54):

I need no further Argue –

That statement of the Lord

Is not a controvertible –

He told me, Death was dead – (432, 13-16)

Emily Dickinson challenges certain conventional notions prevalent in orthodox religious practices or beliefs like the religious notion of death and after life, destructive energy in religion, certain religious doctrines, the sacrosanct identity of the Bible and the Christian Trinitarian theology of the “God/Father/Son – Logos.” She also condemns the hierarchical phallogocentrism and exclusionary patriarchal theology that leads to the expulsion of the woman and the woman poet and God taken as the omnipotent male sovereign.

Her invalidation of the religious doctrine of life after death can be seen in several of her poems. Such a doctrine annihilates the joy of living with its false promises of eternal life after death. In one of her significant poems,
“Because I could not stop for Death”, depicting the scene of the journey of the 
woman persona towards Eternity, she ridicules and invalidates the patriarchal 
doctrines about heavenly bliss in eternity after death: “I first surmised the 
Horses Heads/ Were toward Eternity” (712, 21-24). In the poem, Dickinson 
points out that the false heavenly picture of eternal life should not mislead a 
woman in “Eternity” because it is a state, which has no beginning or end, a 
state beyond death. Again, indicating that the woman in the carriage is no 
longer moving as she passes by life’s scenes, the poet shows that death is not a 
progress but an end:

We passed the School, where Children strove

At Recess – in the Ring –

We pass the Fields of Gazing Grain –

We pass the Setting Sun – (712, 9-12)

The poem also reflects Dickinson’s disclaim of the manipulated, male-
centric sanctified institution like marriage that contributes to woman’s 
oppression. To her, marriage for the woman is death or the end of existence of 
the woman’s female self though she is lured by the visions of a sacrosanct 
divine eternal life. She exposes the sham of such divinity and defiantly argues 
that after marriage, the woman stops living her life and she becomes a slave. 
Consequently, she rejects the repressive conventional marriage for a fulfilling 
spiritual marriage to poetry and remains a spinster in her lifetime: “Title divine 
– is mine! / The Wife – without the Sign!” (1072, 1-2)
According to Dickinson, death “epitomizes the destructive potential”, which she finds “latent in all masculine power, including God’s” (Bennett, *Emily Dickinson* 74). It inflicts a painful sense of loss and sorrow to the woman. This is evident in the poet’s time, in the nineteenth century, where women were not only burdened with domesticity and motherhood but also with religious and moral duties to attend the sick and the dying. They were tormented with the death of their beloved ones due to high mortality by civil war and diseases. Both war (associated with the world of men) and diseases connote the destructive masculine power of God who is regarded as the ruler of man’s destiny. Moreover, woman metaphorically wrestles with a death like existence due to oppressive patriarchal culture and tradition:

The Frost of Death was on the Pane –

“Secure your Flower” said he.

Like Sailors fighting with a Leak

We fought Mortality. (1136, 1-4)

Thus, Dickinson discards the religious doctrine that upholds salvation in the afterlife. Such doctrine only serves to deprive woman from the joy of living. To her, life constitutes the precious reality of her own experience of God and religion in this immense and complicated earth even though there are flaws and negativity. Mortality only enhances the poet’s value and appreciation for life, which to her is “Omnipotence – Enough” and lends depth and resonance to her work as a woman poet:

To be alive – is Power –
Existence – in itself –

Without a further function –

Omnipotence – Enough – (677, 1-4)

The above discussion reveals that Dickinson in finding transcendence in her own soul also finds her own religion.

Dickinson’s refutation of patriarchal theological doctrine of death and after-life reflects an immediate altruism to emancipate and empower the repressed woman. Her refutation of the traditional doctrine of death and afterlife is suggestive of the woman’s oppression. In this connection, it is relevant to mention that Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a foremother of feminist philosophy of religion, whose book His Religion and Hers (1923) claims orthodox religion as being “Death-based” religion, echoing of “posthumous egoism” (“Feminist Philosophy of Religion”). Another French feminist critic, Julia Kristeva, refutes patriarchal theological ideology by stating that “the real symbolic association is not between women and birth but between women and death, setting up men as cultural masters over and above mortality and its intimations in the bodies of women” (“Feminist Philosophy of Religion”). Such opinions of feminist critics substantiate and validate Dickinson’s stance with death, afterlife and life as a woman and a woman poet.

Dickinson does not respect doctrines of conventional puritanical religion. She regards them as patriarchal conspiracies to usurp power and authority to subjugate woman. Bennett also admits: “Even the broadest approach to religious doctrine will argue itself both narrow and a lie, once it
mounts the pulpit to proclaim its ‘Truth.’” (52). The woman poet rejects the doctrines charging them as masculine lies that have been twisted and presented as truths:

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

The Broad are too broad to define

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

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

Dickinson’s mistrust of religion is seen further in her mistrust of the Bible. She refutes the credibility of the Bible as a sacred text. According to Homans, the poet considers the Bible as fictive and states, “Her own experience shows her how easily figurative language can deceive, and the Bible is figurative” (Women Writers and Poetic Identity 168). Her poems also substantiate the poet’s opinion of the Bible as being “largely a repository of untruths” (McNeil 106). Supporting her findings against the authenticity of the Bible, Ostriker, rightly states, “…its authority is always socially constructed, yet always attempts to represent itself as divine” (Ostriker 61). Dickinson repudiates the Bible, authored and defended by the Law of the Father as anti-woman and seeks her faith in her poetry, even though her poems are underrated as “belated, secondary, small in scale, human rather than divine, lyric rather than epic” (Loeffelholz 62). It would be significant to relate Dickinson’s ideas to those of Elizabeth Cady Stanton who also shares a similar view with the woman poet as regards to the degrading status of women in the Bible:
I have endeavoured to dissipate these religious superstitions from the minds of women, and base their faith on science and reason, where I found for myself at last that peace and comfort I could never find in the Bible and the church.... The less they believe the better for their own happiness and development....

(“A Fearless, Serene Agnostic”).

Deriding the Bible, she declares that “faded” men had written the “antique Volume” manipulating divine truths to affirm and maintain an “intrinsic” and “natural” supremacy over women. (Wolff, “Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Task of Discovering a Usable Past” 630). The phrase “Holy Spectres” signifies the “dubious authority over Scripture” by the patriarchal tradition in the poem given below. (Loeffelholz 55):

The Bible is an antique Volume –

Written by faded Men

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

According to the Amherst poet, the Biblical myth that the orthodox patriarchal Father’s claim to identity with his Son and the absolute control over Logos, helps man assert his male hegemony. As Homans points out:

The outstanding feature of the creation in Genesis 1 is that the masculine deity creates with language. God’s word is what supplants feminine fecundity, and when that Word is made flesh it takes masculine form. The Logos is a masculine prerogative, handed down from Father to Son, and it is in
words of approximately the same language that God addresses Adam and not Eve. (*Women Writers and Poetic Identity* 30).

Dickinson shatters such superfluous male fabrication by her rhetorical analysis that if the Father needs a mediator to impart human language, it can be misappropriated to ends other than His own. To her, God’s distance itself defines the lack of the authoritative truth in the orthodox theory of incarnation: “God is a distant – stately Lover – / Woos, as He states us – by His Son –” (357, 1-2). Referring to the poem, Loeffelholz also points out that the “repetition of ‘state’ and the pun on it only draw attention to the insecurity of what is to be established, the link between God’s state and his incarnate statement, the Son” (52). Dickinson refutes the identification of Father and Son as hyperbolic assertion: “Vouches with hyperbolic archness” (357, 7). She also deconstructs the Father/Son’s claims on language as presence and self-identity. In doing so, she subverts male writers like Emerson, who dismiss women as “persons” between man (Son) and the “all in all” (God). In other words, she has challenged Emerson’s view of the poet as being “the image of the Son, his speech Adamic, and poetry the inheritor of divinity” (Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* 31)

Dickinson protests against discursive practices of patriarchal theology, including its expulsion of women. The Christian Trinitarian theology (of the God/Father-Son –Logos) places transcendent authority and reference points of truth and reason in “man” while virtually excluding woman from human thought and emotion as well as in divine imagination declaring her as inferior and inadequate. Her poem, “Why – do they shut Me out of Heaven?” makes a rhetoric of protest against being unacknowledged as an intellectual woman, let
alone as an ambitious woman poet: “Why – do they shut Me out of Heaven? / Did I sing – too loud?” (248, 1-2). This reminds one of what Homans observes: “Eve and women after her, have been dislocated from the ability to feel that they are speaking their own language. They could not speak, with a right to personal usage, of the godlike powers of the mind” (*Women Writers and Poetic Identity* 32).

However, in a paradoxical manner, assuming a lowly, meek and inexperienced “Minor” role, Dickinson subtly demands her inclusion. As a woman poet, she challenges orthodox Christianity to give an opportunity to prove that she is not inferior, subordinate or lacking: “But – I can say a little “Minor / Timid as a Bird!” (248, 3-4). In fact, her only practical tactic would be to make herself small, and “Timid as a Bird”, like the sentimental women poets of the period who write only to gratify the patriarchal Fathers. Perhaps then, the orthodox male-centric culture would let her in through the door of subjection that society keeps open: “Wouldn’t the Angels try me – / Just – once – more –” (248, 5-6).

Dickinson inverts conventional practice by her remarks, challenging the exclusionary patriarchal theology that if the roles were reversed and she were the “Gentleman / In the “White Robe”, (perhaps signifying Christ) she would have given free entry to all including “they” (man or the male poets), for her principle would be one of inclusion:

Oh, if I – were the Gentleman

In the “White Robe” –
And they – were the little Hand – that knocked –

Could – I – forbid? (248, 9-12)

This deep sense of “alienation” and “expulsion” of woman from the divine and pleasurable pursuits of life is also evident in many of Dickinson’s poems. She seeks justice for women’s painful alienation by making the privileged male undergo the same painful expulsion as seen below:

I’m banished – now- you know it –

How foreign that can be –

You’ll know – Sir- when the Savior’s face

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

Sometimes her poems blame man for this painful plight of woman. The poem, “God calls home – the Angels promptly” expresses Dickinson’s agonizing awareness of men’s (whom Dickinson calls as “industrious Angels”) privileges and pleasures in the divinity, while women are made to suffer a painful alienation or exclusion from such divine benefits. Thus, for Dickinson, the “home” of the patriarchal God is the painful symbol of expulsion and negation of woman from divinity. Further, in such institutionalized patriarchal theology, woman’s life is restricted to an inconsequential game of servitude, the “dreary – marbles” while man enjoys the pleasure that touches upon royalty, the “Crown”. This is reflected in the poem below:

God calls home – the Angels – promptly –
As the Setting Sun –

I missed mine – how dreary – Marbles –

After playing Crown! (231, 5-8)

At times, her poems let out a deep sense of anguish for the church’s unjust discrimination against women: “I shall forget the drop of Anguish / That scalds me now – that scalds me now!” (193, 7-8).

From the above illustrations, one observes that Dickinson’s religious metaphors and their reading are relevant to her views on religion. The repetition of images like mouse, rat, minor, bird that are likened to woman, accentuates her argument. The metaphors which the poet takes recourse to are insignificant lowly forms such as “Minor” or timid bird and mouse in order to shatter the patriarchal notions of woman as inferior and weaker sex. In the process, the poet subtly subverts the symbolic order and converts the male-centric notions of feminine weakness and servility as her strength to assert herself as a woman. As a lowly timid mouse, she seeks divine intervention of the Heavenly Father to oust the dominant paternal metaphor, “the Cat” to claim her deprived place as a woman and demands no less than a “Mansion” as her reserved place in the symbolic system:

Papa above!

Regard a mouse

O’erpowied by the Cat!

Reserve within thy kingdom
A “Mansion” for the Rat! (61, 1-5)

From the above lines, it is evident that a mouse is no more a weak animal, but that which demands compensation for her repression. This is evident in Hoefel’s statement: “Dickinson challenges the Papa, the Master, the entire patriarchal structure by subverting and replacing the Symbolic Order – ruled as it is by the Law of the Father – with her reformulation of a metaphor for women’s redemption” (“Emily Dickinson Flesheing Out a New World”)

Dickinson protests against the biased orthodox religion that not only denigrates the woman but also artificially elevates man to undeserving heights. In doing so, orthodoxy entitles man with the exclusive right of experiencing great achievements and power in life. Woman’s hopes and aspirations as literary artist are crushed with the hollow femininity that is endorsed by patriarchal theology and culture. This is the sense that prevails over any reading of Dickinson. It is relevant to refer to Wollstonecraft’s opinion on female subjugation here: “Probably the prevailing opinion that woman was created for men, may have taken its rise from Moses’s poetical story…that she ought to have her neck bent under the yoke, because the whole creation was only created for his convenience or pleasure” (109).

Very often, her poems reflect on the restrictive religious culture affecting her own life as a woman poet. This is evident in the exchange between herself and her brother, Austin Dickinson, regarding her style of writing. In one of her letters to him, she has written of climbing toward a heaven of “fine philosophy” (like him) as a poet but he reprimands her indicating she should stick to a simpler style in her writing rather than
attempting the grand style of the male artist. Her bitter reaction can be seen in her letter to her brother: “…you say you don’t comprehend me, you want a simpler style. Gratitude indeed for all my fine philosophy! I strove to be exalted thinking I might reach you and while I pant and struggle and climb the nearest cloud, you walk out leisurely in your slippers from Empyrean….” ([L 117] qtd. in Bennett, *Emily Dickinson* 151-152). The word “Empyrean” suggests the privileged position (sanctioned by patriarchal religion) that man occupies in poetry, literally converting poetry into a male bastion.

To assert herself as a woman poet, Dickinson rejects the repressive hierarchical Law of the Fathers and defiantly aligns herself with the over-reachers, Eve and Satan. She writes in her letters, “…for turning my back to this very sinful, and wicked world. Somehow or other I incline to other things – and Satan covers them up with flowers, and I reach out to pick them” ([L, 1, 82; 23Jan, 1850] qtd. in Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* 167). Then again, in another letter she pens, “I have lately come to the conclusion that I am Eve, alias Mrs Adam. You know there is no account of her death in the Bible, and why am I not Eve?” ([L, 1, 24; 12 Jan. 1846] qtd. in Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* 169) Through her identification as poet with Eve and Satan, she shatters the identification of poetic language with masculine tradition by male writers claiming themselves as inheritors of divinity. Homans remarks: “By insisting on the proximity between poetic speech and the divine Word in ‘The Poet,’ Emerson makes poetry as masculine a province as does Coleridge with his inheritance of the ‘infinite I AM’” (*Women Writers and Poetic Identity* 170). Dickinson learns from Eve and Satan that the literal truth of language of God and Adam is deceptive. This
is seen when Eve proves through Satan that she does not die on the same day after eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil as God has warned: “[I]n the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (qtd. in Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* 171). Her subtle rebellion liberates her from the constraints of religious orthodoxy that subjugates woman and provides her the opportunity to assert herself as an autonomous woman poet:

First – Poets – Then the Sun –

Then Summer – Then the Heaven of God –

And then – the List is done (569, 1-3)

She quashes hierarchical male-centric religion by reckoning poets superior to conventional divinity. To her, poetry is reliable and genuine unlike the patriarchal Fathers “earthly sun” and “even a Godly Heaven” (Barker 106).

Interestingly, Dickinson does not spare even God, seen in her poems as the centre of the hierarchical phallogocentrism that is preached by orthodox theology. This argument can be substantiated with the quoted lines below:

Over the fence –

Strawberries – Grow –

Over the fence –

I could not climb – if I tried, I know –

But – if I stained my Apron –
God would certainly scold!

Oh, dear – I guess if He were a Boy –

He’d – climb – if He could! (251, 1-8)

The above poem metaphorically enacts the cultural repression of the patriarchal God who discourages woman’s artistic pursuits. The image of the “strawberry” stands for art. Hence, the poet expresses that though she could climb and reach her berries (poetry), yet climbing to pluck her fruit by lifting up her skirt would be offending the hypocritical, orthodox theological ideologies. It would be staining the apron of femininity that is exemplified by passivity, meekness and submission. Dickinson condemns the prejudiced judgment of organized religion in her speculation that if God “were a Boy” he would climb (which also conversely implies that if she were a boy as she often used “boy” as a metaphor to assert herself). She points out that she is discriminated against and not allowed to climb because she is a girl or woman. Referring to the poem, Wendy Barker aptly comments:

Dickinson succinctly expresses the truth of life for nineteenth-century British and American middle-class women. Although domestic chores may dominate one’s day, struggling to climb higher to develop intellectually, to reach “berries” or read books or write poems was not the thing to do; one was expected to remain passive, dressed in spotless apron, waiting for someone else, preferably male, to bring berries – or poems – to one. As a woman, one could not be like the sun (man) itself,
then, climbing up over the fences of earth’s horizons, reaching
for new and varied fruits. (46)

Dickinson’s poems reflect her criticism of the patriarchal God as a sadist who brings misery to women. She regards the evils that women suffer – exclusion, pain, arbitrary disinherirtance, loss and death – are the direct results of His delight in her suffering and His need to assert his power. These evils could not be compensated “by self-humiliating definitions of divine sovereignty (‘supremacy’) any more than they could be relieved by the hope of salvation in some future” (Bennett, Emily Dickinson 68). Women are the martyrs who sacrificed their lives, serving the indifferent and cruel patriarchal God by inflicting excruciating wounds. The poem below describes the unrewarded woman poet, brought to martyrdom by the blind indifferent, sadistic ‘Sire’ viz God:

Sang from the Heart, Sire,

Dipped My Beak in it,

If the Tune drip too much

Have a tint too Red

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Death is the wealth

Of the poorest Bird. (1059, 1-4, 7-8)

Similarly in the poem, “Behind Me- dips Eternity” Dickinson draws attention to the negative realities of a masculine God. She portrays the “gulf
between the existential reality of (female) human suffering and the impervious narcissism of divine (masculine) perfection” (Bennet, Emily Dickinson 69). Women’s lives are like the “Crescent in the Sea” (“the female moon”) enveloped in overwhelming darkness and neither “Miracle” nor “Eternity” and “Immortality” behind or before them could alleviate them. Everywhere around, there are only storms of religious bigotry afflicting their lives with sorrow and suffering:

Behind Me – dips Eternity –

Before Me – Immortality –

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‘Tis Miracle before me – then –

‘Tis Miracle behind – between –

A Crescent in the Sea –

With Midnight to the

North of Her –

And Midnight to the South of Her –

And Maelstorm – in the Sky – (721, 1-2, 13-18)

In certain poems Dickinson discredits God even as being brutal and indifferent to women, when she quips, “Of course-I prayed-/Did God care” (376, 1) and when she calls the Calvanist God “Burglar, Banker – Father!” who has beggared woman. However, these images of God are the poet’s
sarcastic barb on the new power symbols of the active and often denying male
capitalistic patriarchs of her time that assume God-like images to impoverish
woman:

Twice have I stood a beggar

Before the door of God!

……………………………..

Burglar! Banker – Father!

I am poor once more!” (49, 3-4, 7-8).

Dickinson reveals that the so-called God-like Fathers are capitalized
“Crooks” who manipulate the powerful religious symbols to deprive woman
of her deserved equal status and privileges in life.

Dickinson denounces the Calvinist as well as the sentimentalized or
“feminized” concepts of God and declares that He is a male bully who
oppresses and wrongs woman. The Calvinist God is a male Sovereign with
absolute power and he holds his creatures in full subordination to his supreme
will. He was “a sublime, unalterable Other, a Transcendent Being, who neither
could or should be comprehended by ethical terms” (Bennett, Emily Dickinson
53). He saves or damns whom He chose by His mercy alone and His evil is
justified as part of His redemptive plan. He signifies man’s oppressive
dominion on woman. The sentimentalized or “feminized” God, the
domesticated Loving Father is again a symbol of male authority and woman’s
subordination. In fact, from Dickinson’s perspective, symbolic religion looks
more like a bullying scheme of male rivalry against woman, with the
Patriarchal Father at the top. Identifying woman with the wronged Moses of the Biblical myth, Dickinson exposes the injustices and cruelty of the patriarchal God to her lot:

> It always felt to me – a wrong
> To that old Moses – done –
> To let him see – the Canaan –
> Without the entering – (597, 1-4)

Her poetry does not stop with the rejection of religious doctrines and the attack on God, it also finds an alternative to religion. Her alternative lies in the Nature, in the irreligious union of the spiritual and the erotic, in her paralleling woman and Christ, transformation of negative femininity into positive energy and a philosophy based on inclusion.

Dismayed by the exclusive, prejudiced patriarchal deity, Dickinson turns to Nature because it enriches her spiritually and intellectually. As Bennett remarks: “Unable to reconcile herself to the concept of a transcendent God, Dickinson presents nature as a woman-centered and materially-based alternative to established religion” (*Emily Dickinson* 20). Assuming the role of the “Wayward Nun”, she denounces the hierarchical patriarchal Christianity and becomes the worshipper of these “Strong Madonnas” who empower her to transcend the incapacitating requirements of conventional culture and transform herself into a powerful woman poet:

> My Strong Madonnas – Cherish still –
The Wayward Nun – beneath the Hill –

Whose service – is to You –

Her latest Worship – … (722, 7-10)

Claiming herself to be a pagan, the poet worships the feminine world of Nature as the embodiment of ultimate human truths, a realm where she experiences God’s divine presence without any male hierarchical doctrines to deny or persecute her as a woman:

Sweet Mountains – Ye tell Me no lie –

Never deny Me – Never fly –

Those same unwavering Eyes

Turn on Me – When I fail – or feign,

Or take the Royal names in vain (722, 1-5)

She converts natural objects into “truth-telling mothers” and seeks the qualities of “Constancy, fidelity, and unconditional acceptance” which she “found missing in orthodox Christianity” (Diehl, “Ransom in the Voice” 167). In other words, Nature becomes her truth-telling maternal deities of her faith and inspires her with female power to assert herself as a poet. The physical presence of nature secures her with a sense of connectivity with divinity unlike the patriarchal God of Christianity, who remains exclusive, indifferent and hidden. Conversely, in regarding Nature as her spiritual mentor or God she derides the lack of authenticity and significance of the polarized and dualistic male-centric Christian theology that represses woman. Dickinson defiantly
subverts the patriarchal God’s heaven by her own “Heaven” nurtured in feminine Nature.

Nature also offers Dickinson a safe haven, as seen in her representation of Nature as the feminine earth, “Nature is Heaven” (668). Conversely, the patriarchal Heaven is an unattainable myth and hence she writes, “‘Heaven’ is what I cannot reach” (239). In one of Dickinson’s letters to Elizabeth Holland, she says, “[I]f God had been here this summer and seen the things I have seen – I guess that He would think his Paradise is superfluous” (Martin, An American Triptych 131). Ostriker aptly states, “Fantasies of heaven and paradise stream through her work, not merely as a figure for the transcendent and unattainable … but precisely as a figure for earthly and immanent joy” (64). This is also seen in her poems: “The Fact that Earth is Heaven – Whether Heaven is Heaven or not” (1408, 1-2). Dickinson seems to suggest that Eden is protracted and local: present in the everyday, rather than distant and anticipated, as the doctrine of Christian eternity suggests, or a mythical “eclipse” (L. 261) as she once called her parent’s God: “Eden is that old-fashioned House / We dwell in everyday” (1657, 1-2). According to Wendy Martin “Dickinson’s Eden was never lost or far away from her but could be found in her own garden” (131).

The Amherst poet’s creation of such alternative compensatory heaven in nature reveals her deliberate attempt to thwart the destructive images of woman conceived by orthodox religion. Hence, Dickinson “associates diversity and vitality with the female earth and constricting domination with the male God and his heaven” (Martin, An American Triptych 139). Thus, it
would not be wrong to state that for the woman poet the orthodox heaven is a synonym of hell for the oppressed woman.

Through a representation of Nature and woman, Dickinson creates a counter-revolution of a strong female literary tradition nurtured in the divine natural, free spirited feminine world. Hence, she supplants negative images with the positive images of woman. Claiming the Biblical myth (Genesis 2) that it was Adam and not Eve who participated in the creation of language with God, orthodox culture excludes woman from Logos, as it is a male prerogative. Dickinson defiantly inverts the claim. Identifying Nature’s feminine principle of creativity and power with femininity in woman, she establishes a new feminine creativity or woman’s writing in the male-reserve literary tradition. In this context, it is significant to note that nature has “a special status not just as the figure of the mother but also as a mother figure…[and] as the most powerful feminine figure in Romantic poetry…” (Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* 13-14). By creating a return of the woman to the maternal origin, Mother Nature from which she was so far alienated, Dickinson opens up a new space not only for the woman, but also for woman poet:

There is a morn by men unseen –

Whose maids upon remoter green

Keep their Seraphic May –

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

I ask, each new May Morn
I wait thy far, fantastic bells –

Announcing me in other dells –

Unto the different dawn! (24, 1-3, 21-24)

In the poem, the woman poet persona is “invoking an alternative, sacred ground towards which she yearns to travel” amidst the luxurious green of Mother Nature where she and the women poets would engage in their own poetic “dance and game” secure from the constricting “daylight world of masculine orthodoxy” (Diehl, “Ransom in a Voice” 160-161)

It is interesting to link Dickinson’s literary counter-revolution through nature, to her representation of woman’s sexuality. In one of her letters to her sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson, she spells out the woman’s dilemma under the restrictive male-centric Calvinism where she vacillates between the dullness of virginity and the fear of being oppressed like “the wife forgotten”:

…No, they will cry for sunlight, and pine for the burning noon, tho’ it scorches them, scathes them…(L 93)

Such a literary counter-revolution is observed also in her representation of the spiritual and the erotic. One may perceive such an “irreligious” act of associating the spiritual with the erotic in her poems of Biblical paradise:

Rowing in Eden –

Ah, the Sea!

Might I but moor – Tonight –
In Thee! (249, 9-12)

In the above poem, she irreligiously blends the spiritual and the carnal by viewing Eden as a symbol of sexual gratification of the repressed female sexuality. This is also what Ostriker perceives - “… the thoroughly orgasmic and possibly lesbian fantasy of ‘Rowing in Eden – /Ah, the Sea!’ in ‘Wild Nights –Wild Nights!’ make paradise regained as the locus of gratified sexuality” (Ostriker 64)

Again, in the poem, “Come slowly – Eden!” a palpable eroticism is perceived:

Come slowly – Eden!

Lips unused to thee

Bashful – sip thy Jessamines –

As the fainting Bee – (211, 1-4)

In the above poem, Dickinson explores mysticism in homoeroticism by depicting the lesbian fantasy of the joys of entering Eden erotically in a thoroughly orgasmic manner instead of austere divinity. Here, she asserts the repressed female sexuality by identifying with the divine “Paradise”.

The unholy reunion of the mystic and erotic in her poems reflects the poet’s intention to invalidate the external hierarchical relationship between man and woman created by orthodox Calvinism. To drive home the message of the need for a harmonious sexual fulfillment, the woman poet daringly describes a deep erotic communion of the persona with her lover, who is
transformed into a sacramental being, a God in the garden of love. Identifying both herself and her lover God as “Sealed Church”, the persona consummates the unholy “erotic communion as a sacrament” and transforms the restrictive Patriarchal Christianity into her own distinctive “complex theology of secular love” (Gilbert, “The Wayward Nun Beneath the Hill” 27): “Each was to each The Sealed Church,/ Permitted to commune this – time –” (322, 13-14).

Dickinson thus performs an irreligious union to establish a complimentary relationship for woman’s upliftment.

Dickinson’s alternative to puritanical patriarchal theology is poetry itself, which offers a counter-religious zeal. Her poems reflect her attempt to overcome the painful feeling of alienation and unjust discrimination against women in divinity through identification with Christ. In her new faith in poetry, women will feel involved and their values recognized. She intentionally chooses to be Christ-like because only likeness to God’s son would provide her with the exalted religious status to overcome dominance by males and by male-centric religion. Through identification with Christ, she subverts and revises the male-centered religion founded upon the exclusion of woman, intending to possess direct access to the language and laws of the Father, until then denied to her. With her religion of poetry, she endeavors to establish a justice that would culminate in the emancipation, assertion and empowerment of woman:

Mine – by the Right of the White Election!

Mine – by the Royal Seal!

…………………………
The above poem portrays the proud and bold voice of the woman persona powerfully declaring her self-election to her new faith in poetry with Christ’s support, “by the Royal Seal” for self-assertion and deserved recognition as an indomitable woman poet “long as Ages steal”. Referring to the “Voice” of the poem Wolfe aptly states:

The Voice of such utterances might issue from a cloud or from the white heat of flame: it is unfathomable, Godlike. It is a self in the process of creating and sustaining self by an act of naked, relentless incantation. It is vastly more powerful than the more socialized Voices of renunciation and exclusiveness (*Emily Dickinson* 200)

Through her privileging of poetry over religion, Dickinson intends to replace the repressive patriarchal culture and its theology with her philosophy of love based on inclusion. Such an approach to poetry based on love/inclusion/union forms the essence of her idea of divinity of poetry. In her aspirations, Dickinson even envisages to attain a royal status of respect and honor by assuming the title of not any “Queen” but “Queen of Calvary” to reinforce her identity with Christ:

They’re here, though; not a creature failed –

No Blossom stayed away
In gentle deference to me –

The Queen of Calvary – (348, 21-24)

Though the theological God is characterized as sadist in her poems, Dickinson considers Christ in a favorable manner. Through her love based on inclusion, Dickinson not only seeks the inclusion and emancipation of the repressed woman but like Christ magnanimously asks God to forgive the self-centered man who excludes her from divinity:

‘Tis true – They shut me in the Cold

But then – Themselves were warm

And could not know the feeling ‘twas –

Forget it – Lord – of Them – (538, 1-4)

Her poetry pleads for the Christian principle of grace and salvation. She prays for the forgiveness of the self-centered males who have shut woman out from religion stating that they, being privileged, have not yet experienced the painful exclusion and would not understand the “Harm” done by them. Moreover, she believes that for her own “Heavenly esteem” and inclusion in God’s Heaven she needs to forgive them instead of blaming them. Also, unlike them, she who has experienced the extreme pain of exclusion would not want others to suffer the same fate:

Let not my Witness hinder Them

In Heavenly esteem –

Nor Paradise could be – Conferred
Through Their beloved Blame –

………………………

Myself – who bore it – do –

Forgive Them – (538, 5-8, 9-10)

Hoefel opines that the poem echoes of Christ’s plea for his perpetrators, “Father, forgive these people, for they don’t know what they are doing” ([Luke 24:34] qtd. in “Emily Dickinson Fleshing Out a New World). Here, Dickinson’s love based inclusive philosophy seeks to establish a harmonious relationship by pardoning the injustices of the oppressive patriarchy and its divine beliefs. This recalls the feminist critic, Luce Irigaray’s argument: “[A] spiritual relationship between women and men… can enable a harmonization of the human and divine dimensions separated under patriarchal distortions” (“Feminist Philosophy of Religion”).

Frequent parallels between Christ and the female poet characterize her poems. Like Christ, Emily Dickinson resurrects her repressed female self, which has been shut up by the constricting patriarchal theological convention (and hence out of possibility) to a new life where she attains self-sufficiency and self-assertion. She even gains the privilege of free will and choice and befitting her newly full-grown stature, she chooses the “Crown” again a symbol of her status as Queen:

My second Rank – too small the first –

Crowned – Crowing – on my Father’s breast –
A half-unconscious Queen –

But this time – Adequate – Erect,

With will to Choose, or to reject,

And I choose, just a Crown – (508, 15-20)

Her identification with Christ also relates to woman’s suffering in patriarchal religion or culture because He has partaken in grief. This is evident in one of Dickinson’s letters to Mrs. Hill, in 1884: “When Jesus tells us about his Father, we distrust him. When he shows us his Home, we turn away, but when he confides to us that he is ‘acquainted with Grief’, we listen, for that also is an Acquaintance of our own” (qtd. in Hoefel 54-73).

However, she converts her anguish, the crown of thorns into a glittering diadem of poetry. Instead of a vindictive and aggressive reaction against the injustices of the patriarchal theology, the woman poet would embrace her sufferings and transcribe them to create an inclusive religion of philanthropy, where woman would gain her deserved equal status with man in the symbolic realm. She covertly asserts her autonomy as a woman poet by wearing the crown of thorns like Christ and seeks her gateway or inclusion to Eternity through her restorative art:

Burden – borne so far triumphant –

None suspect me of the crown,

For I wear the “Thorns” of Sunset –

Then – my Diadem put on. (1737, 13-16)
Dickinson is therefore considered “the mysterious poet of transformation” that “converts absence into presence, silence into speech, in the same way that Christ, through his mysteries, converted thorns into jewels, bread and wine into flesh and blood, death into life” (Gilbert, “The Wayward Nun Beneath the Hill” 34).

Dickinson’s use of language signals her attempt to create a counter-religious discourse. This can be seen in several of her poems that juggle with the idea of theology only to subvert it. One such poem is given below:

A Word made Flesh is seldom

And tremblingly partook

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

The very food debated

To our specific strength – (1651, 1-2, 7-8)

This poem depicts her refutation of the exclusionary discourse of patriarchal theology. The poet identifies herself with Christ who is the Logos, the Son, the Word made Flesh and shatters the patriarchal man’s monopolistic claim to religion and logos. Such an approach enables the female poet to possess a direct access to the language and Laws of the Fathers. Diehl remarks on the said poem elaborates further on the poet’s use of language:

Dickinson makes language her strongest weapon. The Word becomes her defense as she assigns it sufficient force to devastate her adversaries and exercise her will even against
Divine power. In response to the exclusionary silence of a hostile, or at best, incomprehensible, world and a threatening poetic adversary, Dickinson invokes the powers of language, asserting that her word may vie with the Divine for authority over herself and her experience (Diehl, “Ransom in a Voice” 157)

With reference to Dickinson’s play with words, “word” and “flesh” one may connote Luce Irigaray, who “conceptualizes the female divine as a ‘sensible transcendental’ that is both flesh and word” ([Irigaray, 1993a, 115, 129] “Feminist Philosophy of Religion”). Reversing “traditional incarnation doctrine”, Irigaray speaks of flesh made word instead of word made flesh: “But if the Word was made flesh in this way, and to this extent, it can only have been to make me (become) God in my jouissance, which can at last be recognized” ([1985, 199-200] “Feminist Philosophy of Religion”).

Like Luce Irigaray, Dickinson also creates poetry that reverses the “traditional doctrine”. She not only rejects the traditional theological discourse, she actually creates an alternative discourse grounded on an inclusion philosophy, which she calls as “lov’d philology” in the same poem discussed:

A Word that breathes distinctly

Has not the power to die

Cohesive as the Spirit

It may expire if He –
“Made Flesh and dwelt among us”

Could condescension be

Like this consent of Language

This lov’d Philology (1651, 9-16)

Unlike the phallogocentric theological discourse based on condescension and exclusion her “lov’d Philology” coheres in a Spirit of consent and love i.e. inclusion which is her “specific strength”. Thus, she overcomes the alienation and expulsion from orthodox divinity through her language/discourse that consents to be accessible to her in a way that the patriarchal Logos does not.

Through the new philosophy and philology (of love based on inclusion) founded on Christ (which she refers to as “Spirit”), Dickinson opens up the possibility of immortality to the woman poet:

That I shall love alway –

I argue thee

That love is life –

And life hath Immortality – (549, 4-8)

In her new faith, poetry, Dickinson explores a series of “mysteries” that were distinctly feminine and female. Through the inspiration of a woman poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dickinson is immersed in the transformative mysteries of the ordinary, the homely and the domestic into the extraordinary and the divine to celebrate the female mysteries that “such Victorian sages would have thought ‘smaller’”. (Gilbert, “The Wayward Nun Beneath the
Hill” 25). Being converted to her extraordinary theology of female version, the “wayward nun” (354), with her symbolic white dress could perceive the sacramental radiance in ordinary domestic life of woman. The trivialized world of the household and the garden are turned to mysteries of her art:

The Days – to Mighty Metres stept –

The Homeliest – adorned

As if unto a Jubilee

‘Twere suddenly confirmed – (593, 17-20)

In other words, her enchantment with poetry is depicted in religious metaphors, where the most ordinary day is transformed into a sacrament with her “Mighty Metres”. By infusing the most local and close-at-hand spaces with the sublime, Dickinson effectively shifts the parameters around woman and her domestic environments. It is through her practice of everyday life, her commitment to the centrality of language in creating the sublime, and her conflation of the local with the enlarged that Dickinson effectively charges and changes the world around her.

Thus, Emily Dickinson’s divinity in poetry transcends the exclusion, repression and limitations imposed on woman by patriarchal theology. Instead, her poetry embraces adversity as a positive spirit of powerful energy that helps affirm herself as a formidable woman poet. Through her theology of poetry, Dickinson seeks an alternative inviolate territory that is the development of a tradition of women poets, distinct from that delineated by the male poetic
tradition, where a feminine divine order celebrates the majesty of woman:

There is another sky,

Ever serene and fair,

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

Here is a brighter garden,

Where not a frost has been;

In its unfading flowers

I hear the bright bee hum;

Prithee, my brother,

Into my garden come! (2, 1-2, 9-14)

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