Feminists consider marriage and sex as the two vital spheres that manifest the subjugation and exploitation of woman by man. Radical feminists opine that through marriage, the patriarchal man enslaves woman to domesticity, dependency and motherhood and deprives her of individuality, self-definition, equal dignity and liberty. Kate Millet, author of *Sexual Politics* , condemns marriage as the agency that maintains the traditional pattern of man’s power over women. Woman, hence, loses her autonomy and lives a repressive and subservient life confined to the male-designated feminine sphere – the hearth, home and religion. Simone de Beauvoir remarks: “…woman’s function[s]” in marriage are “to provide the society with children”, “to satisfy a male’s sexual needs and to take care of his household” and provide him with sexual pleasure even at the expense of her own erotic life. (446-7,455). Both Germaine Greer and Helen Cixous denounce male-constructed femininity that represses women’s sexuality wherein a sense of shame has been inculcated concerning their own bodies. Such femininity has deprived them of their natural political autonomy.

The chapter analyses the issues of marriage and sex in Emily Dickinson’s poems in relation to the general feminist opinion on these issues. Simone de Beauvoir’s famous formulation—“One is not born but rather becomes a woman,” when related to Emily Dickinson’s poetry, reflects her approach to issues like marriage and sex. (121). An examination of such an approach helps to understand how nineteenth century American male-centered
ideology and culture oppressed woman. Her poems echo the socio-sexual discrimination suffered by woman through institutionalized marriage, which symbolizes the dominant male-centered social structure. As seen in Dickinson’s poems, woman seems to be conditioned and dehumanized as one experiences in this line: “To hang our head – ostensibly” (105, 1). The woman persona in her poems becomes a non-entity losing her identity and autonomy.

An anecdote from Dickinson’s life substantiates her viewpoint on woman’s repression through marriage from which one understands that the poet herself abstained from committing to marriage. The anecdote relates to Dickinson’s mother, Emily Norcross, who was considered by Dickinson to be a battered woman, whose will had been crushed by her stern husband’s continual domination and admonitions over the years, rendering her to “perpetual invalidism” (Martin, *An American Triptych* 93). The poet was resentful of her mother’s weakness and inability to provide strong female guidance and support to her. She once wrote to T.W.Higginson, “I never had a mother” (L342b), and scornfully described her mother’s intellectual deficiencies as one who “does not care for thought” (L 261). The “perpetual invalidism” of Dickinson’s mother reflects upon the deplorable state of woman in a repressive patriarchal society. Martin aptly comments thus: “her mother’s perpetual invalidism was an effect of the insubstantial and insignificant positions she and the housewife lot held in her husband’s world, a world that literally rendered them invalid” (*An American Triptych* 93).

Different issues surrounding marriage emerge when one analyses Emily Dickinson’s poems carefully. These issues pertain to metaphorical
death of the married woman as she sacrifices her life to her husband, home
and to the patriarchal culture at large.

The pathetic status of married women in Dickinson’s times is fittingly
summed up in the line: “Born – Bridalled – Shrouded” (1072, 10). Such a
powerful verse reflects how women in her times were treated with utter
triviality in the patriarchal world. The only time the woman was
acknowledged or “had her name in print was when she was born, married and
died” (Leder and Abbott 140). The poem’s nuptial image, supposedly full of
life is paradoxically synonymous with death. It ironically points to the
drudgery and incapacitating death-like existence that woman suffer after
marriage. The term “bridalled” puns on “bridled” indicating the constriction
and confinement that a woman is subjected to after marriage. The pun on the
word “bridalled” points to woman being bridled or curbed in the act of being
“bridalled”. The triple symbolism of marriage as woman’s birth or rebirth, her
making or remaking of herself as a bride and finally her cloaking and /or self-
diminishing behind the veil in one day – is suggestive of marriage as being an
eternal doom on the woman. According to the poet, the wedding veil shrouds
the woman just as the dead are shrouded in winding sheets, indicating thereby
a metaphorical end to their lives. The poem reveals Dickinson’s indignation at
the loss of “self” by the married woman. The persona’s excitement about a
new life, as indicated in the word “Born”, is met with an antithetical and
d disillusioned reality of a constricting world that is “Shrouded”. Commenting
on the loss of “self”, experienced by Dickinson’s bride, Martin says, “For
Emily Dickinson, the wife’s expectations of security in marriage are as
illusory as the converted sinner’s hope for heaven” (An American Triptych 104).

Dickinson is exceptionally sensitive to the subordinate status of woman after marriage and explores her social vulnerability and inadequacy. She subtly condemns this conventional suppression of woman prescribed by the social order that is based on a rigid separation of roles, masculine and feminine:

To hang our head – ostensibly –

And subsequent, to find

That such was not the posture

Of our immortal mind – (105, 1-4)

In fact, the socio-sexual politics in her poems throws light on the unique world-view where men gave instructions and women meekly responded to them: “She rose to His Requirement – dropt” (732, 1). This is evident when the poet relates her own experience of women’s status in her household. The relationship that existed between her mother and father is one of “Victorian male tyranny and female submission” (Leder and Abbott 17). Dickinson’s father “did not care to have his thoughts challenged”. (Pollak 29). According to Martin, her father’s letters to her mother were always full of instructions and admonitions: “Don’t get worn out with company. Take care of the little boy – & not let him get bad habits – Pay all debts you contract, if you can… Women must keep clear of debt” (qtd. in Martin, An American Triptych 89).

Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s article in “The Massachusetts Review” mentions that in the late 1820s, Edward Dickinson (Emily Dickinson’s father),
in his series of essays for the local Amherst newspaper on female education argued that home would be and always be women’s “proper sphere”. He insisted that it would be folly to encourage women for intellectual development. He condescendingly states “…Modesty and sweetness of disposition, and patience and forbearance and fortitude are the cardinal virtues of the female sex…These will atone for the want of brilliant talents, or great attainments” (“Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Stanton, and the Task of Discovering a Usable Past” 632).

Interestingly, Dickinson reacts against such manipulative man-made social texts that confer woman with virtue rather than intellect and power to reduce her to an insipid domestic slave of the dominant man:

The Man – upon the Woman – binds –

To clasp her soul – for all –

A prayer, that it more angel – prove – (493, 7-9)

The above poem describes woman’s bondage and assigning of roles based on sexual discrimination. Feminist critics like Mary Wollstonecraft reacted against such sexual discrimination based on gender. She insisted that the female mind should be strengthened “by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience… as blind obedience is ever sought for” by powerful, tyrannical and sensualist man to keep woman in the dark as they want woman only as a slave and a plaything. She also states that woman should not be denied education based on the right principles of virtue and hence “it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason” (103,107).
Dickinson’s poems question woman’s loss of choice and autonomy after marriage leading to a subservient life under the dominant man: “My Husband” – woman say – / Stroking the Melody – / Is this – the way” (1072, 13-15). The social structure as perceived by Dickinson is based on sexual hierarchy where woman leads a submissive life under her husband’s authority. She is denied freedom to exercise her choice to pursue her self-interest and autonomy as it is “in conflict with the subordination and repression inherent in the feminine ideal” (Showalter, “The Female Tradition” 278). Here, it would be significant to examine Simone de Beauvoir’s similar view about the married woman’s distressing status:

Woman is not allowed to do something positive in her work and in consequence win recognition as a complete person.
However respected she may be, she is subordinate, secondary, parasitic…woman finds her place of dignity only in accepting her vassalage (475-476).
Thus, Dickinson’s “astute analysis of the compromised autonomy of the wife” indicates “why she herself chose to be ‘The Wife – Without the Sign!’ and ‘without the swoon’” (Kirkby 75):

Title divine – is mine!
The Wife – without the Sign!
Acute Degree – conferred on me –
Empress of Calvary!
Royal – all but the Crown!
Betrothed – without the swoon (1072, 1-6)
The above lines indicate the poet’s personal choice of her spiritual marriage to poetry, where she would be able to assert her autonomy and safeguard her integrity as an “Empress of Cavalry” instead of being a slave to the domineering man in a conventional marriage. However, interestingly, the poet’s phrase “Empress of Cavalry” indicates that a woman who has chosen to become spiritually wedded to poetry faces extreme hardship and struggle like Christ in Calvary. Such an unconventional choice does not happen without pain. Hence, the persona experiences pain, condemnation and alienation from the symbolic order.

Dickinson’s poems also articulate the woman’s self-denial and loss of intellectual vigor after marriage, thereby pointing to the evil of marriage that invalidates woman. The woman poet condemns the manner in which woman’s intellectual and artistic growth is stifled after marriage for the sake of honor and status as a “…Woman, and of Wife”. Patriarchal culture indoctrinates woman on her intellectual inferiority to man and confines her to the male-created feminine sphere of hearth and home to attend to him. This is evident in Wollstonecraft’s examination of a male writer like Rousseau who feels that the woman is “weak and passive” and hence she is “formed to please and to be subject to him, and that it is her duty to render herself agreeable to her master – this being the grand end of her existence” (175).

Dickinson refutes such institutionalized male-centric idea of marriage as “inauthentic, antiprogressive and antinatural state” and shows the lowly status that woman hold in the male chauvinistic social order. (Pollak 163):

She rose to His Requirement – dropt

The Playthings of Her Life
To take the honorable Work

Of Woman, and of Wife – (732, 1-4)

The above poem reveals how woman’s potentials and passions are dismissed as inessential “Playthings” by the patriarchal culture. The newfound status and importance as wife is actually an ironic representation of her lowly inessential life serving “His Requirement”. Emily Dickinson scoffs at man’s demanding attitude towards woman. The use of capitalized initial letter as seen in the phrase “His Requirement” and words like “rose”, “honorable Work”, “Woman” and “Wife” signify her mockery on the hypocritical patriarchal culture. Such a culture exploits and confines woman to domestic slavery with a hollow status that marriage endows upon her: “Confined, then, in cages like the feathered race …, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch” (Wollstonecraft 147).

In Emily Dickinson’s poems, “marriage” symbolizes “death-in-life” for the woman. Such death-like situation of the married woman is a common occurrence in patriarchal culture: “She has no gainful occupations, no legal capacities, no personal relations, even her name is her’s no longer, she is nothing but her husband’s ‘half’” (Beauvoir 487). The married woman’s life ceases to remain her own. She is enforced to sacrifice it for her husband. There is no recourse or sense of alternative and so she becomes totally abject and embraces the patriarchal power that annihilates her. In one of Dickinson’s letters addressed to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, she expressed her anguish at the one-sided suffering of women as “wife forgotten” pining for the militant man that “scorches them, scathes them.” (L93)
The hollow status of marriage is ironically described by the poet as “the unearthly translation” (or death-in-life) for the woman, because she has bargained her talents and existence to be an insipid subservient wife. (qtd. in Kirkby 76). She loses her creativity and aesthetic gifts – “Amplitude”, “Awe”, “first Prospective” and “Gold” without getting an opportunity to explore and discover what she might have been or what she might have created, “Pearl” or “Weed”:

If ought She missed in Her new Day,
Of Amplitude, or Awe –
Or first Prospective – Or the Gold
In using, wear away,
It lay unmentioned – as the Sea
Develop Pearl, and Weed, (732, 5-10)

According to Kirkby, Dickinson depicts these losses as critical because to her a life without them is “a life without largeness and abundance of capacity or intellectual powers, without wonder and ecstasy, ominously without future orientation.” (76). Beauvoir has rightly remarked: “How many women of talent, engulfed in marriage have been (in Stendhal’s Phrases) ‘lost to humanity’! It has been said that marriage diminishes man… but almost always it annihilates woman” (496).

Conversely, Dickinson’s ideas on marriage throw insight to the nineteenth century women’s status in New England society, where they were compelled to opt for marriage as a safe haven for economic reasons. In the poem below, the woman persona finds “the Girl’s life” that she left behind as
“odd” and vulnerable; calls her new life “safer” and comfortable and compares it to being in heaven:

It’s safer so –
How odd the Girl’s life looks
Behind this soft Eclipse –
I think that Earth feels so
To folks in Heaven – now –
This being comfort – then
That other kind was pain – (199, 4-10)

This “safer” view of the newly wedded wife points to the personal validation and economic insecurity of woman in the nineteenth-century repressive puritanical patriarchal culture, through marriage. Marriage for the girl is “her only means of support and sole justification of her existence” (Beauvoir 446). This is evident in Leder and Abbott’s observation:

…Emily Dickinson never had to endure the kind of poverty that many women like Sue married to escape. Dickinson’s poems may well have been expressing her criticism of these women who married to gain the safety and security which only wifehood offered. (136-137).

It would be interesting to point out that in Emily Dickinson’s poems, “Death” occupies a significant position specifically when related to her views on marriage. Her poems reflect a thin borderline with the Gothic poems where we find powerless women personae threatened by perpetual violation and imminent death. Like most women writers the poet has associated marriage with the Gothic elements in her poems and touched the ultimate taboo subject,
“death” in a disconcerting manner, such as the walking dead women (“How many times these low feet staggered –”) and as the gentleman suitor or the rapist (“Because I could not stop for Death –”). As Daneen Wardrop aptly remarks: “Dickinson gives us ‘a Death that breathes’ (L553), a spooky proposition and one that gets at the chill heart of the gothic” (88). However, the term “Death” in connection with “marriage” symbolically figures in two broadly classified categories – marriage as “death-in-life” and as “life-in-death”. Firstly, marriage for the poet is “death-in-life” where she perceives woman being enforced to leave behind her “life” and suppress her “self” to lead a death-like existence – insipid, subservient and powerless – under the shadow of the dominant man. According to Gilbert and Gubar, it is a symbolical death which the woman experiences, “having died to her own desires, her own self, her own life, [and] leads a posthumous existence in her own lifetime” (The Madwoman in the Attic 25). Dickinson’s poems like “She rose to His Requirement – dropt”, “Title divine – is mine!”, “I tie my Hat – I crease my Shawl –”, are examples of such types of metaphorical “Death”. Dickinson’s most well known poem, “Because I could not stop for Death –” also explores the eternity of a death-like existence after marriage, in an unusual manner, with “Death” as the gentleman suitor:

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality
We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,

For his Civility – (712, 1-8)

The female persona of the poem is deeply engaged in her own “life” when the
gentleman suitor, “Death”, in the marital journey to eternity, forcibly carries
her away. The terms “Immortality” and “Eternity” paradoxically hints at a
wife’s endless death-like existence after marriage or endlessly suppressed life
under male authority. Though the woman is reluctant to give up her life and
freedom and becomes enslaved to man, “Because I could not stop for Death”
yet she cannot and does not have the liberty to assert her choice. The woman
persona is compelled to put away her life’s work and recreation “For his
Civility”.

As she journeys with “Death”, the scenes of life – the school “where
the children strove”, “the Fields of Gazing Grain” and “the Setting Sun”
passes by. This arouses a sense of deadly chill on her, a terrible fear of her
“Lifetime folding up” (273, 4). This fear represents the fear of marriage
experienced by woman because it ends her joy of living.

Analyzing the poem, Kirkby evinces an interesting aspect of
Dickinson’s leanings to the gothic. This is seen in the poet’s representation of
death as a kind of rapist consummating the marriage with the unwilling bride:
“The Dews drew quivering and chill –/ For only Gossamer, my Gown –/ My
Tippet – only Tulle –” (712, 14-16). The bridal gown and its accessories
signify her bondage to overpowering male authority. She senses her loss of
activity and recedes to inert passivity, a dehumanized submissive wife.

Dickinson, symbolically ends the poem with the marital journey
eventually ending in a grave- “… a House that seemed /A Swelling of the
Ground –”, a deadly transformation from a teeming life scene. (17-18). This again suggests the endless death-in-life endured by the woman after marriage: “Since then –’tis Centuries –…/Were toward Eternity –”. (21-24). Her attempts to domesticate the ruins of the house symbolize her painful attempt to hide her death like existence and simulate life.

Emily Dickinson’s woman-centered poems also portray “Death” as a savior who offers a welcome relief to the oppressed woman/wife from the conventionally repressive patriarchal culture. Death liberates the distraught married women from their stagnant repressive life and bestows them with dignity and equality at par with the arrogant man. She no longer has to lead an insipid submissive life of domestic slavery under the dictatorial male authority. Death releases her from the bondage of her gendered body. Dickinson’s poem, “What if I say I shall not wait!” remarkably portrays death as a pleasurable respite to the oppressed woman:

What if I say I shall not wait!
What if I burst the fleshly Gate –
And pass escaped – to thee!
What if I file this Mortal – off –
See where it hurt me – That’s enough –
And wade in Liberty! (277, 1-6)

In this poem, the woman persona is impatient to destroy her gender-marked body in order to escape to the bliss of liberty awaiting her in the new life. Referring to her earthly, sexually discriminated body as a torturous chain of bondage to patriarchy, she exclaims that she has endured enough pain and misery and is adamant to get rid of it through death to “wade in Liberty!”
Death is the key to her newfound life of liberty, which would be beyond all confinement, oppression and gender bias. The restrictive, oppressive and endless backbreaking life of domestic slavery of woman (symbolized by “Dungeons”, “Guns” and “Laces”) under the tyrannical patriarchal society would end. Death would render all these repressive miseries meaningless and powerless. They would all be outdated in her liberated new life just like the transient sentiments, which she has lost – laughter, frivolous pleasurable diversions and sorrowful grief in human relationships:

They cannot take me – any more!
Dungeons can call – and Guns implore
Unmeaning – now to me –
As laughter – was – an hour ago –
Or Laces – or a Travelling Show –
Or who died – yesterday! (277, 7-12)

Thus, death will liberate the housewife from oppressive patriarchy.

Dickinson’s poetry is also about the unsung heroines of the domestic reserves that is the married woman’s grueling life of domestic chores. Her woman-centered poems also explore the post-marital trauma experienced by women due to endless trivial duties they have to perform after marriage – “mind the house – and the food – sweep if the spirits were low” (L30). Her poem, “How many times this low feet staggered –” depicts the “abject ontology” of the lowly housewife. (187). It echoes the fatigue of the married woman enslaved in domestic chores. Hence, the ‘Indolent Housewife’ staggers on her “low feet”, oppressed by unending domestic obligation:

How many times these low feet staggered –
Only the soldered mouth can tell –
Try – can you stir the awful rivet –
Try – can you lift the hasps of steel! (187, 1-4)

She suffers painfully “the lowly thimble which has been as effective as the rack” hot iron, “awful rivet” and “hasps of steel” that silence and confine her to a listless traumatized life. (Kirkby 70). These torturous devices are symbols of backbreaking domestic slavery (needlework, spinning, weaving, cooking), restrictions and confinements that oppressed woman. According to Wolfe, Dickinson subtly explores a subtle identification between the housewife’s sufferings and Jesus Christ’s crucifixion since the term “staggered” recalls the “the burden of the cross” and “rivet” the “nails of the crucifixion” (Emily Dickinson 206).

The grueling life of domestic slavery spares her no time to take care of her self and renders her fragile body distasteful:

Stroke the cool forehead – hot so often –
Lift – if you care – the listless hair –
Handle the adamantine fingers

Never a thimble – more – shall wear – (187, 5-8)

She meekly suffers her degeneration, being led to believe that it is the result of her own failings or flaws. Her uncomplaining and self-effacing dedication and sincerity in executing her daily round of work goes unnoticed. As Wolfe observes, Dickinson ingeniously exposes the simple dignity and heroic charity in the “Indolent Housewife”:

Unnoticed, generally uncomplaining and self-effacing, the “Wife” instantiated a humble form of heroism in her daily
round of work and love, and she was perpetuated not by legends of a single great act, but by the modest duties and kindnesses of countless, anonymous women – worn and faded – who have been willing to accept the burden of caring. (Emily Dickinson 206).

Dickinson’s poems not only articulate the endless oppressive domestic routine of the married woman but also portray the ensuing utter triviality of her life: “…When the Errands done / We came to flesh –upon –/ There may be – Miles on Miles of Nought” (443, 15-17). Eventually, she finds her life of drudgery, an endless stretch of emptiness or nothingness. Here, one is reminded of Simone de Beauvoir’s remark about the abject misery of the housewife enforced with the endless routine of domesticity:

In domestic work, with or without the aid of servants, woman makes her home her own, finds social justification, and provides herself with an occupation, an activity, that deals usefully and satisfyingly with material objects – shining stoves, fresh, clean clothes, bright copper, polished furniture – but proves no escape from immanence and little affirmation of individuality…The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present. She never senses conquest of a positive Good, but rather indefinite struggle against negative Evil, the years no longer rise up towards heaven, they lie spread out ahead, grey and identical. (470).
However, Dickinson through her woman persona enacts in her poems, the most painful experience, which the victimized housewife has to undergo. She is to conceal her wretched reality that is her woes and death-like existence from the outside world and “simulate” life:

And yet – Existence – some way back –
Stopped – struck – my ticking – through –
We cannot put Ourselves away

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

To simulate – is stinging work – (443. 11-13, 19)

This is because despite her miserable condition, she persists to protect the inhuman patriarchal world from the shock of her lowly and suffering state: “‘Twould start them –” (443, 25).

Through her poems, Dickinson also exposes how the artificial male symbolic world crumbles with the unnoticed death of the enforced caretaker, the “Indolent Housewife”:

Buzz the dull flies – on the chamber window –
Brave – shines the sun through the freckled pane –
Fearless – the cobweb swings from the ceiling –
Indolent Housewife – in Daisies – (187, 9-12)

The description of the unkempt and neglected household due to the death of the housewife indicates the ineffectual man-made world that crumbles after the woman’s death. The buzzing of dull flies, “the freckled pane” and the fearless cobweb exhibits the sheer sense of a decayed world that has ensued with the death of the “Housewife”. Dickinson dares to point out that woman
whom the patriarchal world regards as “nought”, “superfluous”, “smallest” is actually the backbone, life and soul of the hypocritical symbolic order. (154):

The smallest Housewife in the grass,
Yet take her from the Lawn
And somebody has lost the face
That made Existence – Home! (154, 9-12)

Kirkby remarks: “(the) lowly housewife transforms the chaos of existence into the ceremonies of and rituals of home. She is an integral though devalued agent of culture, the abased base” (72).

Interestingly, Dickinson’s poetry views marriage as a power play, where the puritanical culture blesses marriage as a contrived contract for the powerful male to rule over woman’s life and self. Wolfe also observes such a view, when she says, “marriage ‘contract’” is “no more than the document by which one signed away self and watched as the agreement was strapped into a legal briefcase” (“Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Task of Discovering a Usable Past” 642). The poet reacts against such kind of constricted marriage contract where the housewife becomes enslaved to the man like a piece of commodity to be owned. The poem “He put a belt around my life –” depicts the power game that man plays on the woman. (273):

He put a belt around my life –
I heard the Buckle snap –
And turned away, imperial,
My Lifetime folding up –
Deliberate as a Duke would do
A Kingdom’s Title Deed – (273, 1-6)
The poem brings to the fore Dickinson’s subtle barb at the dynamics of power and subservience. The capitalized letter of the term “He” aptly indicates the power play wherein the man assumes sovereign power and the woman exists as the inferior weaker “other”. This power play, where man occupies a stronger position reflects the condition of marriage in nineteenth century America. This forced imprisonment and chastity of the wife is emphasized forcefully by strong phrases such as “…put a belt around my life” and “the Buckle snap”. As Simone de Beauvoir remarks, “Marriage incites man to a capricious imperialism: the temptation to dominate is the most truly universal, the most irresistible one there is” (482). The woman endures a stifling and oppressive life after marriage while the man arrogantly deviates from his familial responsibility and indulges in life’s interests: “And turned away, imperial, /My Lifetime folding up –”. Her autonomy ends as her lifetime folded up like a “title deed”. The presence of the dominating male authority compels her to resign herself to passivity, subservience and invalidism: “Henceforth, a Dedicated sort – / A Member of the Cloud” (273, 7-8).

In such a power game that is described by the poet, women are discouraged from bonding and grouping with women. The poet decries the deceitful practice of patriarchy that denies female bonding or sisterhood between women while men are privileged with brotherhood. In the nineteenth-century, puritanical patriarchal society women were confined to a stifled and miserable life without even the freedom to find solace for their marital woes in the company of their fellow sisters. Dickinson explores this sorrowful plight of women in her poems:

And deal occasional smiles
To lives that stoop to notice mine –
And kindly ask it in –
Whose invitation, know you not
For whom I must decline (273, 12-16)

In the above poem, the woman persona is forced to either suppress or sacrifice her desire to accept the invitation of her fellow sisters: “To lives that stoop to notice mine” with whom she exchanges “occasional smiles”. This inhuman restriction of her fundamental right to social life clearly points out to the hypocrisy and gender bias of the repressive puritanical patriarchal society of nineteenth century.

Dickinson’s poems not only reveal marriage as the end of autonomy, self-mutilation, subservience, domestic slavery, restriction and confinement for the woman, but also her frustration and loss of self-esteem. Her poem, “The World – stands – solemnner – to me –”, conventionally analyzed as a glorification of marriage can be interpreted as representing woman’s misery, in striving to be an ideal wife to her husband. The poem focuses on the touching experience of the nineteenth-century Amherst housewife who often suffered from bouts of extreme depression and self-hatred due to man’s enforced idea of imperfection on woman:

The World – stands – solemnner – to me –
Since I was wed – to Him –
A modesty befits the soul
That bears another’s – name –
A doubt – if it be fair – indeed –
To wear that perfect – pearl –
To that munificence, that chose –
So unadorned – a Queen –
A Gratitude – that such be true –
It had esteemed the Dream –
Too – beautiful – for Shape to prove –
Or posture – to redeem! (493, 1-6, 11-16)

In the beginning of the poem, the woman persona like the newly wedded wife is ecstatic at being raised from a lowly state to the status of being a “Queen”. She is overwhelmed with gratitude and humility at his “munificence”: choosing her to bear his “name”. However, her excitement dwindles into a sense of anxiety and she loses her poise, because she doubts her self-worth and her ability to fulfill his expectations of her as the perfect wife.

It is interesting to note in the poem, Dickinson’s sarcasm at the pompous claim of the patriarchal man who regards “marriage” as his act of benevolence (like gifting a “perfect pearl”) to the woman. However, in actuality, he has metaphorically owned “her soul” and her life through marriage. As her master, he oppresses her with demands of a worthy ideal wife who lives up to his expectation and proves herself better than his gift:

To wear that perfect – pearl –
The Man – upon the Woman – binds –
To clasp her soul – for all –
A prayer, that it more angel – prove –
A whiter Gift – within – (493, 6-10)
Such expectations traumatize her and lead to subsequent feelings of inferiority. She suffers from self-hatred and low self-esteem as she falls short of his ideal – “Too beautiful – for Shape to prove – / Or posture – to redeem!” Her earlier gratitude at his “munificence” in choosing her, “So unadorned – a Queen –” is turned to abject misery.

This man-made seed of doubt sowed on the woman persona’s sense of self-worth cripples her soul and stunts her growth driving her to a sense of resignation. Man tends “to exaggerate feminine incapacity” to “increase his authority” and woman succumbs to his evil design that “doom(s)” her to “incompetence” (Beauvoir 483). She becomes the helpless victim of her husband’s scorn and oppression, rendering her to “invalidism”, a disease that Dickinson’s mother suffers in the hands of her domineering husband.

Such a loss of woman’s self-esteem leads her to trauma. Dickinson in her poetry delves into the perpetual psychological trauma that the woman in marriage suffers from. She becomes terribly disturbed with “The Chiefest Apprehension” lest she “…should insufficient prove” (751). She even undergoes self-mutilation in the process to remake herself according to the man’s fantasy:

So I – the undivine abode
Of His Elect Content –
Conform my Soul as ’twere a Church,
Unto Her Sacrament (751, 13-16)

The depiction of trauma explains woman’s mental and emotional harassment in married life. In articulating the emotional distress of the woman
undergoes, Dickinson also exposes the so-called “powerful” man’s self-created insecurity:

Doubt Me! My Dim Companion!

Why, God, would be content
With but a fraction of the Life –
Poured thee, without a stint –
The whole of me – forever –
What more the Woman can,
Say quick, that I may dower thee
With last Delight I own! (275, 1-8)

In the above poem, the man harasses the woman because he doubts the sincerity of her devotion to him. Exasperated, she admits that he is right to doubt her affection for him but states (the universal truth of her lot) that being a slave to him, left with no choice or freedom, she is in no position to give her devotion freely. Moreover, she has been legally tied to him forever though he doubts her submission to him. Wollstonecraft lashes out against such a “militant man” and his hypocritical culture for harassing woman with such spurious expectations: “Why do they expect virtue from a slave, from a being whom the constitution of civil society has rendered weak, if not vicious?” (135).

The poem also symbolizes Dickinson’s subversion of the male sense of intellectual superiority over woman. By referring to him as “My Dim Companion” – the term “Dim” relating to his lack of intelligence to perceive the obvious truth of their relationship, the woman poet ridicules the tall claims
that man makes of his intellect. Kirkby rightly supports her criticism: “He is ‘Dim’ to have expected otherwise” (80).

Thus, one could say that Dickinson also reflects the sociological status of the woman in the nineteenth century where “marriage” literally meant giving up of the woman’s body and mind, as total surrender to the patriarchal order:

It cannot be my Spirit –
For that was thine, before –
I ceded all of Dust I knew –

……………………………….

Dwell timidly, with thee! (275, 1-3, 9)

This is observed in the poem where one finds the woman persona has been left with no choice but to marry him. Being enslaved to him, he has laid claim to both her body and soul. Therefore, she has nothing of her own to give to him freely except to live meekly in his shadow. This again relates to the pathetic plight of woman’s loss of choice and denial of autonomy in orthodox patriarchal culture. Beauvoir and other feminist critics have also revealed that girls in male-dominated society are denied the freedom to exercise their choice in marriage, “it is forced much more tyrannically …” and marriage itself “enslaves” them to men. (450). They, become the property of their husbands after marriage and the “slightest sign of independence on her part seems to him a rebellion; he would fain stop her breathing without his permission” (484). Here, it would be significant to refer to Kirkby’s similar stand relating to this poem- “…because the woman’s autonomy has been negated she can’t
be there to acknowledge him. Because she is a slave she can’t give freely” (82).

Kirkby’s observation (the woman cannot give freely) induces one to ponder on Dickinson’s surveillance of love in such marriages. In the above poem, the woman persona initially declares that she cannot love him freely as she has no choice being enslaved to him. This indicates the abject misery of the woman to practiced forced love, when there is lack of love in the man-woman relation. Hence, it is evident that Emily Dickinson describes loveless marriages in nineteenth century domestic household.

The issue of marriage dealt with so far leads one to a discussion of the issue of sex in Emily Dickinson’s poems. The chapter reviews Emily Dickinson’s sexual themes to reveal how the woman faces both denial of and threat to her female sexuality in the male-centric system.

Delving on denial or repressed female sexuality, the woman poet emphasizes that sexual fulfillment remains unattainable for women as phallocentric hierarchies disempowered them. Such phallocentric hierarchies are read in various cultural beliefs. This may be seen in Freud and Lacan terming female sexuality as “lack”, “taboo” and “dark” or “castrated” (Cixous). Indoctrinated with false femininity, women are led to feel ashamed and inferior of their sexuality. This is largely due to phallocentric hierarchies.

Secondly, patriarchy upholds male sexuality or the phallus as supreme and for this purpose patriarchy allows for the divine intervention of God the Father. If “sex is power” then men masquerade the power of male or masculine sexuality and repress women’s female or feminine sexuality and passions. (Paglia 38). In fact, “[f] Female Sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of
masculine parameters” (Irigaray 363). To the patriarchal men, women are “inferior and incomplete men” (Bennett, “Critical” 247). Since, women are denied of their female sexuality and sexual desires they suffer from want of gratification of their repressed sexuality

The subject of female sexual gratification is significant in Emily Dickinson’s poems. This can be observed in the poem below:

Wild Nights – Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

………………………………
Rowing in Eden –
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor – Tonight –
In Thee! (249, 1-4, 9-12)

In this extremely erotic poem, the woman’s repressed female sexuality passionately yearns to experience the ecstasy of sexual fulfillment with her lover. The storm of the physical world indicated by the opening line of the poem, “Wild Nights – Wild Nights!” is an analogue to the intense tumultuous sexual passions of the woman, who wishes that she were with her lover to enjoy “Luxury”. However, the “Luxury” is only a subjunctive possibility for the woman in the male-centric culture as indicated by the phrases in the poem: “Were I with thee”, “should be” and “Might I but moor”. Such sexual gratification for the woman could be only in dream and in imagination but not
in the grim reality of the patriarchal world. Beauvoir also made a similar viewpoint about woman’s sexual fate:

…she has no right to any sexual activity apart from marriage…desire and gratification are subordinated to the interest of society for both sexes; but man, being transcended towards the universal as worker and citizen, can enjoy contingent pleasures before marriage and extramaritally. (454-55).

According to her, the woman’s reproductive function is very often dissociated from erotic pleasure and marriage is actually intended to suppress woman’s erotic life.

What is interesting in the poet’s depiction of female sexuality is that it leads her to an affirmation of woman’s sexuality. For example, Dickinson employs the image of the sea to signify the power of female sexuality and thus disclaims male’s phallic power for the woman persona’s sexual gratification. The woman imagines the lover as the port with whom she experiences the tumultuous sea of “love” like a lost ship tossed about in the violent sea storm.

It would be significant to note that Dickinson’s poems have frequently used the feminine term “Eden” as the paradise of female sexual fulfillment. This is probably done by the woman poet to assert the repressed female sexuality in a phallocentric culture, by identifying with the highest order of bliss and satisfaction. In the above poem too, the woman persona wishes to lose herself in the blissful ecstasy of sexual union, “Rowing in Eden” with her lover in the stormy night. Thus, it could be safely deduced that Dickinson’s
“Eden” is the abode of sexual gratification where the repressed woman could unleash the man-made taboos and savor her sexual desires.

Emily Dickinson’s poems unabashedly shatter the hypocritical patriarchal culture’s repressive manacles of femininity and reiterate that the female sexual passions/sexuality symbolizes paradise:

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)

As in the earlier poem, Dickinson’s woman persona here seeks sexual gratification. She defies the patriarchal decrees of femininity that makes her deny and develop a self-hatred for her body. Reliving “Eden” as metaphor of the Christian’s lost Paradise, she parallels “Eden” with the female’s ultimate sexual bliss. She explores and enjoys the “paradise” of her sexual passions/sexuality through metaphorical suggestion of the bee sipping nectar from the flower as seen here: “Bashful – sip the Jessamines –/As the fainting Bee –”. However, she is apprehensive in this sexual engagement, as she is not used to it and implores to be cautious – “Come slowly-Eden”.

The idea of the bee’s sexual delights after reaching the flower late – raiding “her chamber” and losing itself in the bliss of counting and sipping (“Enters”) his nectars – imply an ambiguous climax that is “wonderful and deadly” (Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms 25). The line, “Enters – and is lost in Balms” indicates this culmination of the female in sexual engagement. Like
the sea, imagery discussed earlier, where in it one is drown in sexual ecstasy, the phrase “lost in Balms” symbolizes the overwhelming fragrance of female sexuality. Bennett also expresses a similar opinion: “The speaker’s awareness of the sheer physical enjoyment of female sexuality, symbolized by the idea of losing oneself in balms, is almost overwhelming” (Emily Dickinson 167). Karl Keller’s comment on this poem is relevant here: “[S]he can even play the daring virgin inviting seduction, foreplay and penetration” (26).

Sometimes Dickinson’s sexual poems trace the path of sexual gratification through fantasy. Bennett has aptly interpreted Dickinson’s “Paradise” as “a woman’s vagina” referring to it candidly as “a wonderful place in which to be lost. It is that paradisiacal land of milk and honey where, presumably, we would all like to go” (167).

However, Dickinson’s erotic poetry often raises critical controversies and contradictions about the issue of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Though some critics have attributed the sexual poems to Dickinson’s alleged male lovers of her “Master” letters, yet many feminist critics such as Bennett consider her erotic poetry as “homoerotic” in mode indicating the lesbian tendency of the poet. Pollak relates Dickinson’s idea of sisterhood to sexuality: “Dickinson’s self-sufficient sisterhood is subtly impregnated by sexual rage, and the major theme, ‘never quite disclosed/ And never quite concealed’ (1173), is her suppression of a complex homosexual identity” (133). To substantiate this opinion, critics like Rebecca Patterson and John Cody even went to the extent of asserting that Dickinson had a lesbian relationship with her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson. Sometimes she has been associated with one of her friends Kate Scott Anthon in such a
relationship. This is evident from her letters to two women that clearly express her profound attraction and fascination for the female body/sex. Here is one of her letters that suggest an erotic sensitivity to her intimate friend and sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson:

> Only think of I, Susie; I had’nt any appetite, nor any, Lover, either, so I made the best of fate, and gathered antique stones, and your little flower of moss opened their lips and spoke to me, so I was not alone. ([L.202] qtd. in Bennett, Emily Dickinson 156)

Nevertheless, some feminist critics negate the lesbian tag on Emily Dickinson and insist that the poet would have only fantasized sexual relations with her women friends as suggested by her homoerotic poems: “If ‘twas a Dream – made solid – just/The Heaven to confirm – /Or if Myself were dreamed of Her – / The power to presume” (518, 5-8). In addition, lesbianism connotes “sameness” or sexual equality in feminist terms. As Beauvoir has aptly put it: “Between women… separateness is abolished, there is no struggle, no victory, no defeat; in exact reciprocity each is at once subject and object, sovereign and slave; duality becomes mutuality” (436). Therefore, it would be proper to relate Dickinson’s lesbian streak as a woman’s “desire to avoid being reduced to an object for men or a desire to compete with man on their own territory” (Fallaize 206).

Eventually, it would be appropriate to regard Dickinson’s homoerotic mode as a subtle defiance of the hierarchies of phallocentrism, which disempowered woman. The homoerotic mode discredits phallocentrism that subjugates the female to the male sexuality. By asserting clitorocentrism, that
affirms specifically female sexual power (as more pleasurable and satisfying), Dickinson empowers the repressed female sexuality of woman. The assertion of the power of the clitoris, the female sex organ, which exists purely for pleasure, would subvert male domination. As Bennett interprets, “the ‘excess’ this organ represents – the excess of absolute sexual autonomy – is a threat to individual men and to male rule generally” (“Critical” 238). The overtly homoerotic poem, “All the letters I can write” (334) addressed to her cousin Eudocia (Converse) Flynt is a fine example of her claims of clitorocentricism:

Depths of Ruby, undrained –
Hid, Lip, for Thee,
Play it were a Humming Bird
And sipped just Me – (334, 5-8)

From the above example one assumes that Dickinson’s homoerotic mode in her poetry is focused on the power of female sexuality as implied by female sexual images such as “Ruby”, “lips”, “Humming Bird” and “sipped”.

Other than the assertion of female sexuality through heterosexuality and homoeroticism, Dickinson’s sexual poems reveal also the anxiety suffered by the nineteenth century woman at the loss of her virginity. In the poem, “Did the Harebell loose her girdle” the poet reflects upon such dread at the loss of female sexuality after sexual compliance:

Did the Harebell loose her girdle
To the lover Bee
Would the Bee the Harebell hallow
Much as formerly? (213, 1-4)
This fear of loss of love and respect in the sexual act is explored using the same metaphorical comparison of the encounter of the bee and the flower as in the poem “Come slowly – Eden!” Just as the “Harebell loses her girdle” to her “lover Bee” similarly the woman loses her female sexuality to her lover. After the sexual compliance, the woman doubts as to whether she would still enjoy the same “love” from her lover – “Would the Bee the Harebell hallow/Much as formerly?” She is worried that the consummation of love might end the love altogether. Here, the poet’s effective usage of language again comes to the fore with the punning on the phrase “looses her girdle”, which means the female loss of virginity.

The poem also sets an illustration for the woman’s doubt over sexual desire being able to outlast consummation. In the final stanza, Dickinson accentuates the erotic element through references to “Paradise” and the yielding of “her moat of pearl” where “Paradise” refers to female sexuality and “moat of pearl” connotes the female body. She transforms the bee to the “Earl” of Eden to represent the lover and reiterates the same doubts and anxieties of the female persona, about whether her lover would still remain the same lover and fulfill her female sexual passions with the same bliss of ecstatic union:

Did the “Paradise” – persuaded –

Yield her moat of pearl –

Would the Eden be an Eden,

Or the Earl – an Earl? (213, 5-8)

Several of Dickinson’s poems also explore a newer dimension of sex that is the threat of sexual violence suffered by women in male dominated
society. Women are silent and secret sufferers who cannot even redress their grievances as patriarchy and its culture overpowers and silences them. They live in torment – afraid to own their female bodies and suffer “continual fear of its violation, psychological and physical” (Wardrop 72):

I am afraid to own a Body –
I am afraid to own a Soul –

Profound – Precarious Property –

Possession, not optional – (1090, 1-4)

The above fear of the female persona only implicates to the woman’s fear of the body due to fear of sexual violation. Her poems also explore forced sex or rape to expose the traumatizing agony of sexual harassment experienced by women in the nineteenth century repressive patriarchal world. Sex being a delicate subject in those times, it was difficult to depict sexual experience; and that too forced sex explicitly by nineteenth-century women writers. Most often, the expressions of rape appeared euphemistically and metaphorically. Like many women writers, Dickinson uses the gothic medium to represent the fear and horror of sexual assault more emphatically. Accordingly, she employs natural and supernatural settings, animal imagery, monsters and goblins to enact the crime. Also, for the poet’s “gothic heroine, the thought of sex is often inextricably conjoined with the thought of pain or death” (Wardrop 70). Dickinson’s poem, “One Anguish – in a Crowd –” is a poem in a natural setting employing animal imagery to depict the horror and brutality of a grisly gang rape:

One Anguish – in a Crowd –
A Minor thing – it sounds –
And yet, unto the Single Doe
Attempted of the Hounds
'Tis terror as consummate
As legions of Alarm
Did leap, full flanked, upon the Host – (565, 1-7)

In the poem, the gruesome act of a woman hideously gang-raped is enacted metaphorically in a hunt scene where the single “Doe” is chased and brutally attacked by a pack of Hounds. “Hounds” exemplify the beastly character of animals and refer to the male villains. The choice of the female deer as the victim heightens the vulnerability of female sexuality. The magnitude of the woman’s terror of being raped is indicated in the word “Terror”. The metaphor of rape itself is evoked and consummated in the image of the pack of ferocious dogs that aggressively assault and ravage the “Single Doe”. Hence, the terror of the woman is witnessed here: “As Legions of Alarm/ Did leap, full flanked, upon the Host –”. Wardrop remarks on the issue of rape – “The fear of rape is ‘consummate’ in that the fear is both utmost and, hideously, consummated” – is relevant to understand Emily Dickinson’s representation of rape. (76).

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

He fumbles at your Soul
As Players at the Keys
Before the drop full Music on –
He stuns you by degrees –
Prepares your brittle Nature
For the Ethereal Blow

Deals – One – imperial – Thunderbolt –

That scalps your naked Soul – (315, 1-6, 11-12)

The above poem enacts once again the woman’s rape that leads her to trauma. The appalling act of the man is metaphorically represented by the action of a performing artist, a pianist hammering the keynotes of the piano building the music to its crescendo. The rape victim undergoes a torturous experience of suspension as the rapist clumsily seduces her in the most merciless and sadistic manner stunning her “by degrees”. She is made to confront the pain of being sexually violated – “By fainter Hammers – further heard –”. The torture numbs the consciousness of the victim. In this numbed state, there is temporary relief for the violated woman. However, hardly has she time to recover from the shock of being tampered, the ruthless rapist assaults and “scalps” her “naked Soul”. The term “scalps” leaves no doubt about its murderous brutality on the female soul that has already suffered psychic damage, being stripped of its essence. There is an uncanny and gruesome feeling, in the manner with which the man executes the cruel action in slow, deliberately paced and sure movements as he comes for the “lightning-quick kill”.

Dickinson condemns the indifferent and authoritative patriarchal society that tends to trivialize the sorrowful predicament of the sexually violated woman. With the ingenuity of her language, the poet effectively portrays the violated woman’s plight. Dickinson also observes how such
condemnable harm on woman is regarded by the oppressive male-centric system as minor, as a small leech bite, and as “…scarce accounted – Harms”. However, by comparing the hurt to “The Bung out – of an Artery”, which is obviously a gruesome act, she emphasizes the gravity of the heinous crime of rape against the lone powerless female by the powerful aggressive males and the society’s indifference to the heinous crime. (565).

In examining the society’s indifference on women who are rape victims, Dickinson’s poems also depict the psychological condition of the violated woman who relives the traumatic horror of rape in the midst of an inhumane society. Instead of comforting and rendering justice to the assaulted woman, society blames her female sexuality for the violation. Hence, she suffers disgrace and disapproval for no fault of hers while the male culprit goes scot-free: “When, Felon, led along, / With shackles on the plumed feet,” She is deprived of not only her freedom but also her right to voice out her grievance. The plight of such a woman is described here: “Like Philomel, whose tongue is cut out to keep her from accusing her offender, this victim will not speak of the atrocity… Like Olympia, she has been repressed into silence and cannot find her way into voice” (Wardrop 86). This reading becomes evident in the following lines:

The Soul’s retaken moments –

When, Felon led along,

With shackles on the plumed feet,

And staples, in the song, (512, 20-23)
Thus, the victimized female soul suffers the horrors of rape again (though psychologically) as her right to secure justice is violated and she is forced to endure humiliation in silence:

The Horror welcomes her, again,

These, are not brayed of Tongue (512, 24-25)

The societal indifference to woman’s sexual assaults is further a subject viewed here:

Women’s bodies have been treated like dolls; women as Olympias have been superannuated by legal neglect or even hostility. Women have been repressed under a megalithic machinery of judiciary acts that perpetuate rather than redress female–directed violence” (Wardrop 80).

Dickinson, through her woman persona, voices her frustrations on the constraints of woman’s sexuality. Hence, her poem can be seen as an exploration of the limitations that sexuality imposes upon woman. This particularly leads woman in the patriarchal culture to frustration, depression and sometimes even to thoughts of mutilation of her body, and occasionally to female envy of masculine power. This can be experienced in the poem below:

Rearrange a “Wife’s” affection!

When they dislocate my Brain!

Amputate my freckled Bosom!

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

The woman persona’s demand for mutilation, “Amputate my freckled Bosom!” and transformation “Make me bearded like a man!” subtly suggests her challenge to the constraints of gender, particularly, the constraints on her
female sexuality. She detests the painful subservient life she leads under the dominant man. Recognizing her female sexuality as the cause of her repressive life in a male-centric society, she prefers to be bisexual, without distinction between masculine and feminine, an androgynous self to gain autonomy and exist in liberty beyond the gender boundaries.

Emily Dickinson’s poetry poignantly brings out the utter frustration experienced by the sexually repressed woman under the patriarchal tyrannical dominance and stresses that she even contemplates death to wear the “Diadem” (signifying an autonomous self): “Then – my Diadem put on”, to relieve herself from the bondage of her female sexuality and end her repressive gendered life. Perhaps, the woman’s “Big” secret may be her “bandaged” wound of the constraints of her female sexuality, which would remain within her until death liberates her from it:

Big my Secret but it’s bandaged –

It will never get away

Till the Day its Weary Keeper

Leads it through the Grave to thee. (1737, 17-20)

Dickinson’s poems thus bring out woman’s vulnerability about her position as married woman and her bitter experience of sex. Nevertheless, Dickinson is not a poet who wallows in self-pity or pity for woman, and she can be subtle and dynamic too, with her potential warning that women may be weak, but the weak have their weapon too. She subtly warns against female discrimination by indicating that the self-sacrificing woman has a bomb in her breast. The bomb in the woman’s breast is suggestive of her volatile energy that remains submerged in domestic scrupulousness. If she releases her
energy, it has the deadly potential to destroy the artificial male-centric world order along with her:

But since we got a Bomb –

And held it in our Bosom –

Nay – Hold it – it is calm – (443, 27-29)

The “Bomb” is figurative of the women’s power that she exercises in her public sphere. In other words, Dickinson seems to suggest that a woman as a writer has ‘got a Bomb’ that has the potential to explode and make public the atrocities on woman. The above precincts are explored in the next chapter “Woman as Writer”.