Chapter V

Woman as Writer

In the nineteenth century puritanical Victorian culture, the fundamental definitions of literary or creative authority was patriarchal. This is observed thus: “[T]he patriarchal notion that the writer ‘fathers’ his text just as God fathered the world is and has been all-pervasive in Western literary civilization” (Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic 4). The male writers in such patriarchies claimed themselves as the natural authority of authorship and excluded women writers from the literary culture. Men stifled women’s literary creativity stating that female sexuality lacked the power and aggressive male quality to write. This is reflected in G.M. Hopkins remark on the artist: “ [The artist’s] most essential quality is masterly execution, which is a kind of male gift, and especially marks men from women, the begetting of one’s thoughts on paper, on verse, or whatever the matter is” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic 3).

What is of prime interest in Emily Dickinson’s poetry is her attempt at subversion of patriarchal literature. The chapter therefore focuses on the woman poet. In other words, it examines her writings as influenced by her experiences as a woman in a repressive patriarchal culture and her choice to write rising above female exclusion from the literary arena. Such an exploration is essential to recognize and credit her invaluable contribution to women’s writing.

Dickinson’s poetry as mentioned above transcends the oppressive hierarchical limitations of her puritanical patriarchal culture. It signifies a
woman poet’s refutation of woman’s repression, which Mossberg explicates as “the strange captivity of the nineteenth-century patriarchal closet” (17). Dickinson herself describes such a patriarchal closet below:

As when a little Girl
They put me in a Closet –
Because they liked me “still”– (613, 2-3).

The image of the closet indicates woman’s confinement in a patriarchal culture that denies her right to self-definition. The woman’s confinement reminds one of Virginia Woolf’s words that woman “live like Bat or Owl, labour like Beast, and die like Worm” (A Room of One’s Own).

Like most women writers of the nineteenth century, Dickinson experienced her gender as a painful obstacle to her recognition as a writer. Her poems were criticized as “spasmodic”, “uncontrolled” and “wayward”. She experienced despair due to the discrimination of male writers and mentors. Moreover, she also suffered the lack of a motherly precursor or mentor to nurture her feminine imagination and strengthen her female power.

As a woman writer, Emily Dickinson was greatly influenced by British women writers rather than her American women peers. She found the work of her British counterparts more liberating than that of her homebound fellow American contemporaries like Lydia Huntley Sigourney and Helen Hunt Jackson. In fact, Dickinson claims that she has the “Conversion of the Mind” after reading the “Foreign Lady”, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s verse novel “Aurora Leigh”. This conversion helps her to transform the ordinary into the mysteries of the extraordinary and perceive beauty in the “Dark” feminine world, “The Dark – felt beautiful –” (593).
However, Dickinson refuses to write according to the male-prescribed conventional style and theme infused with sentimentality, which characterized the era. Even the poems written by her fellow American women writers were confined to “warm domestic affection, and pure religious feeling” (Bennett Emily Dickinson 6). They are like “‘Aeolian harps’ to the cultural values of their age” centering on trivial domestic ideology (6). It is interesting to note Dickinson’s sense of humor in calling her American women contemporaries as “Brittle” ladies, who have restricted their professional aspirations in order to find acceptance in the male world of writing. Gilbert and Gubar discuss Dickinson’s personal view on “Brittle” ladies: “…this ‘gentle spinster’ often observed her female contemporaries with almost clinical objectivity, noting that ‘Gentlewomen’ were by turns ‘Brittle Ladies,’ ‘Soft Cherubic Creatures,’ veiled images, or even simply ‘Plushes’ – cushiony things as passive as sofas” (The Madwoman in the Attic 588). Such images of Dickinson’s female contemporaries occur in the following verse:

What Soft-Cherubic Creatures –
These Gentlewomen are –
One would as soon assault a Plush –
Or violate a Star (401, 1-4)

Her female contemporaries’ style of writing as seen above was the outcome of the patriarchal dictum that insisted that woman writer must “make no claim for herself as a serious intellectual” and that she was expected to exercise only her emotions, not her intelligence. (Wolfe, Emily Dickinson 175). On the other hand, Dickinson challenges these constricting literary norms that stifle woman’s creativity.
Dickinson has a unique approach to writing of poetry. Writing in her feminine space, she seeks “taller feet” with her unconventional style and makes the choice to compete with men on men’s territory, especially the territory of the mind. In other words, she tries to stretch the boundaries of what it meant to be a woman and write in a womanly way through the “Undiscovered Continent” of her female mind. The poet’s intense desire to explore the immense possibilities of poetry is seen in her words below:

Soto! Explore thyself

Therein thyself shalt find

The ‘Undiscovered Continent’ –

No Settler had the Mind. (832, 1-4)

Juhasz rightly states that the “Undiscovered Continent” of the female mind gives the poet the “possibility for complete and thorough experience, for risk, intensity, range and depth, that as a woman she could never have achieved in the world at large. She could not wander across the continent like Walt Whitman; but she could move freely in the ‘undiscovered continent,’ the mind” (The Undiscovered Continent 10). She (Juhasz) also quotes Patricia Meyer Spacks’ concept of the female imagination, which is relevant to understand Dickinson’s power of imagination:

The cliché that women, more consistently than men, turn inward for sustenance seems to mean, in practice, that women have richly defined the ways in which imagination creates possibility: possibility that society denies…women dominate their own experience by examining it, giving it form, writing about it. (qtd. in Juhasz, The Undiscovered Continent 11)
Spacks’ idea of the woman ‘turning inward for sustenance’ effectively defines Dickinson’s style of writing. Her private space of the mind reminds us of Virginia Woolf who stresses on women’s privacy “a room of her own if she is to write fiction”, a room that symbolizes detachment, freedom, autonomy, means, opportunity and of one’s own self. (*A Room of One’s Own*).

Dickinson’s unique poetic approach as seen above, reflects a woman writing with a difference. The difference is perceived in her unconventional writing that liberates her from trodden paths and helps her establish new ways of looking at life and poetry as a female muse:

The Bees – became as Butterflies –

The Butterflies – as Swans

Approached – and spurned the narrow Grass –

And just the meanest Tunes

The Nature murmured to herself

To keep herself in Cheer –

I took for Giants – practising

Titanic Opera – (593, 9-16)

As seen in the above poem, Dickinson envisions poetry as a vehicle to transform the lowly life of a woman to an extraordinary life. Through this new lease of life in poetry, the woman’s repressed female self becomes empowered and emancipated just as the humble “Bees” are transformed to beautiful “Butterflies” and “Nature’s “meanest Tunes,” considered lowest to “Titanic Opera” to her. Here, it is significant to note that the poet induces such transformations through images of feminine nature. The poet by doing so, rises above the “‘narrow’ circumference of earth-bound female domesticity”
This throws up a challenge to the “low” or “inferior” state and opens up new possibilities of viewing womanhood and herself as a woman poet. Such a new possibility is referred to as “Lunacy of Light” that makes “noon at night” and small things great. This interpretation is evident when one reads her poem:

And whether it was noon at night –

Or only Heaven – at Noon –

For every Lunacy of Light

I had not power to tell – (593, 5-8)

Emily Dickinson as a woman poet with a difference can be seen in several other ways. Firstly, she sets her own standards of how a woman poet should write in order to be a representative poet. She does not allow the social prohibitions on her gender to hamper her aspiration. As we find in her poem on Barrett Browning, ‘I think I was enchanted’ where “Bees – became as Butterflies –/ The Butterflies as Swans –”, she subtly transcends the male definition of woman as “little”, “small” and “simple” and transforms the female into the “great” and the powerful. Mossberg rightly points out that “…in her aesthetics less is more, small is greater” (198). Hence, we find in her poems images like berries, crumbs, bees and pearls used in a paradoxical sense that assert the power of woman. She subverts patriarchal notions by transforming the small and insignificant woman’s life into a powerful existence that enriches and empowers her as an indomitable woman poet making a mockery of woman being “small”:

And then – the size of this “small” life

The Sages – call it small –
Swelled – like Horizons – in my vest –

And I sneered – softly – “small”! (271, 13-16)

Thirdly, one can define Dickinson’s poetry as writing with a difference in the sense that poetry becomes a weapon to stage her protest against patriarchal repression of woman’s artistic and literary creativity. For this purpose, two issues are addressed in her poetry – male dominance over writing and male portrayal of woman. Through these issues, her poems echo the plight of women writers who share a limited literary space when compared to male writers and the patriarchal imprisonment/silencing of/within male-constructed images of “angel” and “monster”. In both ways, women are denied autonomy whether as women writers or women characters in male hands. For, they find themselves suppressed in dull and passive femininity or “killed” into objects of art (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 17). Through her poems, Dickinson boldly challenges male control of authorship by asserting a powerful latent female creativity. This can be seen in her use of fiery and violent images like “loaded gun” and “volcanoes”. Through the image of the “loaded gun”, the poet warns that once the latent female creativity is manifested in the submissive traditional woman, it would destroy the patriarchal structure, i.e., “Owner” that represses her:

My Life had stood – a loaded Gun –

In Corners – till a Day

The Owner passed – identified –

And carried Me away – (754, 1-4)

It is then that the male-inscribed repressed feminine self would be replaced by an aggressive female creative self (“And now We hunt the Doe”) which would
not only have the power to destroy male sovereignty in literary creativity but create immortal art of poetry: “For I have but the power to kill, /Without -the power to die –” (754, 23-24). For a woman writer like Dickinson, writing is basically a protest against inferior treatment of women’s creative powers, against the prevailing attitudes and conditions in the patriarchal culture and also opposition to the female entrapment in a male-centered ideology. Above all, writing is also a demand for greater autonomy in woman’s life and writing.

The recurrence of images of power further explains Dickinson’s protest against subjugation of female creativity. Through her use of the fiery image of volcano, “Vesuvius at Home” she equates dormant female art to the enormous volcanic energy. (1705, 8). Her creativity has the potential to erupt violently from the dark interior female self as unpredictable as the volcanic eruptions. A reading of the verse below elaborates on the matter:

The Solemn –Torrid – Symbol –

The Lips that never lie –

Whose hissing Corals part – and shut –

And Cities – ooze away – (601, 9-12)

Helene Cixous also affirms female power thus: “A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments” (357).

The dilemma of a woman as writer can also be observed in Dickinson. Her poems reflect “a painful double bind” which she suffers due to her choice of a vocation as woman poet. (Wolfe, Emily Dickinson 170). Such a “double bind” or dilemma can be analyzed further. In the mid-nineteenth century, American culture condemned outspokenness in women and discouraged them
from ambition, fame, power, or wealth as they were considered to be men’s privileges. So the woman writer experiences a complex dilemma whether to be an artist or woman, “to create beauty or to be beautiful” (Wolfe, *Emily Dickinson* 170). Dickinson also faced the same plight. On the one hand, she could be a powerful poet if she was assertive, on the other, she could suffer the loss of her traditional role of womanhood or femininity because of her assertiveness. Juhasz’s observation further explains this complex dilemma of the woman writer:

The “choice” between “artist” and “woman” is one that is not unique to Emily Dickinson: it is that same choice that our society has asked and continues to ask of every woman ambitious for the fame or power or wealth that the world traditionally accords to men…Of the few who have become artists and won the world’s recognition, most have chosen as did Dickinson, sacrificing the traditional “feminine” role of wife and, most certainly of mother. (*Naked and Fiery Forms* 13).

Dickinson’s dexterously controlled, subtly complex poems explore the plight of the woman poet struggling between assertion and silence as seen in the poem below:

I would not paint – a picture –
I’d rather be the One
It’s bright impossibility
To dwell – delicious – on –
And wonder how the fingers feel
Whose rare – celestial – stir –

Evokes so sweet a Torment –

Such sumptuous – Despair – (505, 1-8)

The words “Torment” and “Despair” bring out the woman’s writer dilemma whether to be the painter or the picture. Adrienne Rich, in her comment on the above poem, explains that the woman poet’s struggle as “choosing an orthodox ‘feminine’ role: the receptive rather than the creative; viewer than the painter, listener rather than musician; acted upon rather than active” (“Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson” 61).

The experience of the “double bind” initially leads to anxiety of authorship. The woman writer suffers a painful exclusion from the male-centric literary domain:

Why – do they shut me out of Heaven?

Did I sing – too loud?

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Just – see – if I troubled them –

But don’t – shut the door! (248, 1-2, 7-8)

In the poem, through the woman poet persona Dickinson expresses her anguish at her painful exclusion from the male-centric domain of creative art. She has ascribed her exclusion in her writing differently as a woman poet rejecting the male-defined repressive literary style for women. As McNeil remarks: “if a woman writer fails to write in a manner that her society perceives as feminine …she can lose her position in society” (McNeil 42). Dickinson’s “only practical option” to seek inclusion “is to make her small, and ‘Timid as a Bird’, like the sentimental woman poets of the period. Perhaps
then she’ll be let in through the door of subjection that society keeps it open” (McNeil 43). Thus, she sums up in the poem what it feels like to be a woman poet, a self-confessed “only Kangaroo among the Beauty” (L268).

Nevertheless, the anxiety of authorship gradually leads to self-assertion. Such a journey from woman writer’s painful experience to self-definition and self-assertion may be traced here:

[For] all literary artists, self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion” and for “the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself. (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 17).

“I’m Nobody! Who are you?” is Dickinson’s line in a poem that explains her passage to self-assertion. (288, 1). In the process, she undergoes a painful alienation from her own female self. However, she will rather prefer the painful segregation of self than being “dreary” and vulgarly public to be “Somebody”:

How dreary – to be – Somebody!

How public – like a Frog –

To tell one’s name – the livelong June –

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

Women’s poetry as a vehicle of self-assertion can be understood in several ways. First of all, a study of Dickinson’s poems as a revolt against the nineteenth cultural and religious practices that oppress women aids this effort. Through her poems, she expresses that women were discriminated against by
the patriarchal culture and religion reducing their life to meekness and poverty:

I was the slightest in the House –
I took the smallest Room –
…………………………………
I never spoke- unless addressed –
And then, “twas brief and low –
I could not bear to live – aloud

The Racket shamed me so – (486, 1-2, 9-12)

Her poems record the female discrimination practiced by culture and religion. As Leder and Abbott point out: “…the Christian church live up to much of its rhetoric, particularly its rhetoric of meekness and poverty. Who could better know the life of the meek and the poor than women” (211). Women were ignored, restricted and confined in the stifling feminine sphere where they were made to remain”. They were denied the right to lead the privileged life of men engaged in intellectual and artistic pursuits-“I could not bear to live – aloud/ The Racket shamed me so”. If the women pursued higher and intellectual activities, they were considered unnatural and “perverse”.

Dickinson’s another method of self-assertion is by dwelling in literary seclusion, which is her unique method of revenge against oppression. In seclusion she would dwell in “Possibility”, her private sphere of poetic imagination so as to take refuge from “Prose” or the mundane constricted Victorian woman’s life: “I dwelt in Possibility- a fairer house than Prose” (657, 1). Dickinson claims it to be “far more awesome and amplitudinous than the suffocating ‘Prose’ of female adulthood” (Gilbert and Gubar, The
Madwoman in the Attic 591). By dwelling in “Possibility” she aspires to do no less than gather paradise: “The spreading wide my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise” (657, 13-14). As “the pen is mightier than the sword”, Dickinson’s pen prefers cultural seclusion rather than literary seclusion.

One admires Dickinson’s proliferous nature of writing. Dickinson’s bold step of not only choosing to be a writer but also sustaining herself as a writer is yet another instance of writing the female self. In other words, her determination to have penned 1775 poems and all of these being “self-motivated and self-taught” describes her sustenance as a poet. (Mossberg 170).

The Amherst poet’s assertion can also be seen in her approach to poetry as a vigorous practice of intellectual autonomy. Her lyrics in theme and style have shown a deliberate and self-conscious independence or even defiance of tradition, convention and orthodoxy:

I cannot dance upon my Toes –

No Man instructed me –

But oftentimes, among my mind,

A Glee possesseth me, (326, 1-4)

The root of her writing, she quips in the above poem does not lie on stereotyped male instruction but on her liberated mind, that experiences “Glee”.

Dickinson views poetry as her refuge through which she attempts to resolve the anxiety of being a female poet and the anger of female suppression in a patriarchal culture. For this purpose, Dickinson adopts various enactments and impersonations (like a madwoman, a dutiful daughter, a domesticated woman or an angel) as a protective camouflage to avert the censoring eyes of
male critics and assert herself as a woman poet in her repressive society. As she mentioned to Higginson, “When I state myself, as the Representative of the verse- it does not mean – me – but a supposed person” (L 268). In this context, one could refer to Leder and Abbot’s comment:

Dickinson expressed her real angers and anxieties by living her life as though it were a series of theatrical performances requiring different, dramatic postures or masks. Dickinson’s different masks or voices composed the persona she developed for herself, her “supposed person,” a kind of alter ego that allowed the real Dickinson to express herself without fear or censor. (192)

Dickinson’s aesthetic strategy of impersonation helps her to free herself from socio-psychological constraints and criticisms, which may cripple her art. For instance, apparently she is the dutiful daughter as in the poem “The Murmur of a Bee”. The daughter persona dutifully takes refuge behind a protective master-father-God to escape from society’s criticism: “If anybody sneer –/Take care for God is here” (155, 8-9). In this regard, her dutiful daughter image acts as a protector and nurturer of her secret poetic self. She protects herself from the orthodox patriarchal culture by only hinting at her “truth” as a woman poet: “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –//Success in Circuit lies” (1129, 1-2).

At times, she impersonates a child artist to save herself from a traditional eclipsed life as a woman. She puts on the poetic mask of innocence through her “trusty word” as a “little ninny” to maintain the secrecy of her female art. This reminds us of Elaine Showalter’s observation about women
writers: “…women novelists exploited a stereotype of helpless femininity to win chivalrous protection from male reviewers and to minimize their unwomanly self-assertion” (“The Female Tradition” 276):

‘Tis not to sight the savior –

It is to be the saved –

And that is why I lay my Head

Upon this trusty word – (1347, 9-12)

With regard to Dickinson’s role-playing as a child, Mossberg comments that she enjoys a magical control over her experience that she is otherwise denied. In this manner, she is able to cope with her own “powerlessness and lack of a voice in society”, and also “limit and circumscribe what happens to her” (191).

Dickinson’s poetry is also an expression of the poet’s secret self. As mentioned before, through her impersonations, she leads a dual life as a dutiful and rebellious daughter to nurture her creative talents. As a dutiful daughter, she lives in compliance with conventional femininity (characterized by passivity, self-denial and domesticity) and as a rebellious daughter, she secretly nurses a forbidden poetic ambition. The secret self stimulates the tension and conflict necessary to fuel her art just like the lava beneath the volcano is ready to erupt at any moment:

A still – Volcano – Life –

That flickered in the night –

When it was dark enough to do

Without erasing sight – (601, 1-4)
The above poem reveals the poet’s enormous female creative power secretly smoldering in her feminine self. Here, it would be significant to note that Dickinson also describes her secret self in her letters when she identifies with the images of “Daisy” and volcano:

You say I do not tell you all – Daisy confessed- and denied not.

Vesuvius don’t talk- Etna – don’t – [Thy] one of them – said a syllable- a thousand years ago, and Pompeii heard it, and hid forever- She couldn’t look the world in the face, afterward- I suppose- Bashful Pompeii! (L 233).

Thus, underneath the mask of the obedient daughter, the poet is like the angry child with the latent explosive power of female creativity.

Similarly, the image of the ‘cocoon’ explains her secretly impregnated poetic self. In one of the poems, there is the reference to cocoon, “bursting with words, yet confined and ‘shut up’” to protect her creative self from the repressive culture. (Mossberg 172). It also defines her muted self-assertion as a woman poet against the stifling patriarchal imprisonment.

Stealthy Cocoon, why hide you so

What all the world suspect

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Your secret, perched in ecstasy

Defies imprisonment! (129, 2-3, 5-6)

Sometimes, as a woman poet, she also wages a subtle war with “words” and thus breaks up the repressive patriarchal world:

She dealt her pretty words like Blades –

How glittering they shone –
And every One unbarred a Nerve
Or wantoned with a Bone – (479, 1-4)

Through her poems, she not only condemns the repression of woman but also subverts patriarchal dominance by asserting herself through her powerful poetic art. She creates “an inviolate territory where words… are her weapons against limitation, orthodoxy, and a hostile world” (Diehl, “Ransom in a Voice” 159). Her words are knives that shine with lethality that can prove fatal to the symbolic order: “And every One unbarred a Nerve/ Or wantoned with a Bone”.

Dickinson’s approach to male writing is seen in her use of poetry to exact a subtle revenge on patriarchal literature. She assumes a lethally rebellious and powerful identity as a woman poet that can wound her male adversaries:

There is a word
Which bears a sword
Can pierce an armed man –
It hurls its barbed syllables
And is mute again – (8, 1-5)

In the above poem, the potentially, dangerous woman poet persona breaks out from the enforced silence, wields words like swords and destroys her male critic. Joanne Feit Diehl aptly remarks:

In her [Dickinson] attempts to marshal against such continued threats to her autonomy, 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. (“Ransom in a Voice” 157)

Unlike the male writer who makes poetry a public sphere, the woman writer, in this case, Emily Dickinson, converts poetry into the private sphere. According to Martin, she “turned the code that confined nineteenth-century women to the private sphere into a privilege that permitted her time and space to write” (An American Triptych 127). Writing in isolation and obscurity in her parent’s home, she creates a haven for herself to protect herself from stultifying social obligations. This can be seen in the verse below:

There is the solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be
Compared with that profiler site
That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself –
Finite infinity. (1695, 1-8)

The above poem paradoxically inverts the feminine sphere into a luxurious privacy of the woman poet to indulge her soul in the “finite infinity” of art. She considers her feminine space as “profunder” and as being more congenial ground than that of the male. One of her letters denotes this idea:
“The Fence is the only Sanctuary” (L 359). A feminist critic’s remark on this issue could also be discussed:

Dickinson chose to keep to her house, to her room, to live to her mind rather than in the external world, in order to achieve certain goals and to circumvent or overcome certain forces in her environment and experience that were in opposition to the goals – particularly, the expectations and norms that a patriarchal society creates for women, especially problematic when a woman wants to be a poet. (Juhasz, The Undiscovered Continent 4-5)

Dickinson is different as a woman writer because she does not oppose patriarchy outright. Instead, she embraces the patriarchal notions of feminine virtue of self-denial or self-abnegation in order to subvert them. Hence, sometimes her poems seem to assimilate patriarchal values, as seen below: “Renunciation – is a piercing Virtue –/ The letting go/A Presence – for an Expectation –” (745, 1-3). She renounces the trivialized life of womanhood defined by patriarchy to become a woman poet and “have the attendant power, omnipotence, and glory” (Mossberg 185). However, to achieve immortal fame and power she goes through a painful renunciation as she must choose against herself. She renounces marriage and womanhood to retain her virginity and obscurity. She has to “bandage” her sexuality and her poetic genius and become a haunted woman. Such a pain or suffering becomes a poetic necessity for Dickinson. From this pain, this renunciation and abstinence she can create poems. Thus, the dutiful renunciation of her life is depicted in the poem:

I cannot live with You –
It would be Life –
Life is over there –
Behind the Shelf (640, 1-4)

From the above discussions, one can deduce that her poetry itself is a paradox since she first adopts feminine ideals prescribed by patriarchy as the moral and aesthetic rationale for her art, and then transcends poetry from the same ideals. In the poem, “Mine – by the right of the White Election”, she willingly and freely makes the choice to renounce her womanliness by (male-defined) self-abnegating renunciation, to glow with the “White Election” of poetic art:

Mine – by the Right of the White Election!

Mine – by the Royal Seal!

Mine – by the Sign in the Scarlet prison –

Bars – cannot conceal! (528, 1-4)

In the poem quoted above, one finds the aesthetic strategy discussed earlier. Here, we find Dickinson blessed by the “Royal Seal” of a “White Election”, and then gradually subverting religious patriarchy, by what she asserts. In other words the “Royal Seal” is toppled with the stress on “Mine”.

In this regard “white” becomes a recurrent motif in her poems. According to Gilbert and Gubar, Dickinson’s white represents “a two-edged blade of light associated with both flame and snow, both triumph and martyrdom. (The Madwoman in the Attic 615). It acts out as a painful renunciation for self-creation as a woman poet and the bliss of the self-empowerment of a woman in the repressive culture. It symbolizes pale femininity on one hand and on the other, the purity of female art.
Such a use of poetry by Dickinson as a double-edged knife certainly does not leave her unscathed. Very often poetry becomes a prism that reflects woman’s pain, suffering and even psychosis. Woman writers in the nineteenth century, who had taken up the vocation of creative writing, had to pay the heavy price of “isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness and obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture” (Gilbert and Gubar, “Infection in the Sentence” 25). This traumatic experience is explored in one of Dickinson’s poems:

Much Madness is divinest sense –
To a discerning Eye –
Much sense – the starkest Madness
Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail
Assent – and you are sane –
Demur – you’re straightway dangerous –
And handled with a chain – (435, 1-8)

Though the woman poet in the above poem claims madness as the “divinest” sense of writing poetry, yet one can perceive the underlying pain and danger she suffers as a female artist amidst the patriarchal culture. She suffers from a psychological dilemma of being trapped in the crippling patriarchal images of femininity, “angel in the house” (a submissive, passive woman) and an aggressive freakish monster (a creative woman writer). As Adrienne Rich has rightly pointed out: “It is an extremely painful and dangerous way to live – split between a publicly acceptable persona, and a part of yourself that you
perceive as the essential, the creative and the powerful self, yet also as possibly unacceptable, perhaps even monstrous” (67).

The confessional poems of Dickinson reveal madness in the poet persona and indirectly reveal madness in her poetic methods. A close study of her poems facilitates comprehension of a woman writer’s labyrinth of pain and suffering that amounts to drive the poet to a sense of numbness bordering madness. Such a labyrinth of anguish can be observed ranging from an almost “incapacitating self-consciousness and yet a compulsive exhibitionism, a brain debilitated, a sensibility ruptured, a soul ‘bandaged’, a self bickering with an alien, antagonistic other self or selves; frequently this self is fragmented into halves or thirds of various states of animation, consciousness and gender” (Mossberg 17).

In one such confessional poem, Dickinson seems to have split herself into a series of divided selves that haunt her. Once again, ‘white’ as a recurrent motif helps comprehension of the female self. Her emblematic white dress implies a series of female split selves—“a little ‘maid’ in white, a fierce virgin in white, a nun in white, a bride in white, a madwoman in white, a dead woman in white and a ghost in white” (Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic 622). Thus, her white dress suggests the schizophrenic dangers implicit in taking up the vocation of being a woman poet:

One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted

One need not be a House –

The brain has Corridors – surpassing

Material Place –

Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting
External Ghost

Than its interior Confronting –

That Cooler Host. (670, 1-8)

The poem reveals the agonies implicit in the self-division of a woman writer, far more serious than any gothic thrill. In the poem, the woman persona feels less dangerous, “safer” to meet a real ghost in midnight than to encounter her inner ghosts of split selves. This reflects the traumatic psychological condition into which the divided selves of the nineteenth century women writers so often fell. Here, the gothic genre is of real significance for women writers as it provides appropriate metaphors to suggest her painful psychotic experience of authorship. According to Gilbert and Gubar, “[t]he interior schisms” she dramatizes in her poems indicate “that she felt herself the victim to be haunted by herself the villain, herself the empress haunted by herself the ghost, herself the child haunted by herself the madwoman” (The Madwoman in the Attic 624):

Ourself behind ourself, concealed –

Should startle most –

Assassin hid in our Apartment

Be Horror’s least. (670, 13-16)

The psychic fragmentation seen to be almost bordering on the gothic experience, articulates the plight of a self-divided woman. It represents the ambiguities and discontinuities, which the woman poet experiences due to conflicting societal pressures of being a woman. For instance, in the poem “The Soul has Bandaged Moments”, the “Goblin” symbolizes the forbidden dark ideas within her, embodying a double, i.e., a gooblin self within the self:
She feels some ghastly Fright come up
And stop to look at her –
Salute her- with long fingers –
Caress her freezing hair –
Sip, Goblin from the very lips

The Lover – hovered – o’er – (512, 1-2, 5-7)

The above lines reveal the female poetic self divided and torn by the monstrous, goblin self in her. Pointing out the integral relationship of the apparently innocent “Soul” and its goblin tormenter, the woman poet reveals the psychic torment she experiences of being mentally raped in the repressive culture.

One could examine in Dickinson’s poetry how this poetic tormenting of the self takes a serious turn, where the persona resorts to extreme means. Another chilling verse depicts the poet or the poet persona losing her mental balance and contemplating suicide:

Tis Sunrise – Little Maid – Hast Thou
No Station in the Day?

…………………………

My little Maid – ‘Tis Night – Alas
That Night should be to thee
Instead of Morning – Had’st thou broached
Thy little Plan to Die –
Dissuade thee, if I could not, Sweet,
I might have aided – thee (908, 1-2, 9-14)
Here, the poet’s goblin self assumes the form of a murderous madwoman and incites her with thoughts of suicide. Her tone is ominously “kind” creating eeriness. Madness as shown in the poem is borne out of Dickinson’s painful awareness that patriarchal culture provides no space for ambitious woman poets with great intellectual ability, thereby encouraging them, in a sense, to die.

In reference to Dickinson’s use of the grotesque, (seen from her “metaphorical equation of death/fragmentation / madness” in a parodying manner) feminists critics opine that the poet’s verses mirror “the nineteenth-century mortuary verse” or the “‘Voice from beyond the grave’ convention”, used by many “Victorian ‘lady’ poets”. In Dickinson’s case, the poet portrays “the living burial of those [the women writers] who have been denied a viable place in the life of their society” (Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic 627). Being excluded and alienated, women writers suffer profound agony of death-like mental despair as seen in one of the most relevant poems of Dickinson:

I felt a Funeral in my Brain
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading – treading – till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through –

…………………………………

And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here –
And then a Plank, in Reason, broke, (280, 1-4, 18-20)
In the gothic tradition, the above poem depicts the psychic fragmentation of women writers leading to madness through the image of a living burial. The dead-alive soul experiences its burial into a state of oblivion. She imagines the coffin being lowered with the accompaniment of bells ringing, sound of mourners walking about breaking the silence and a strange feeling of eerie “Silence” engulfing the soul as it is dropped “down and down” into oblivion. The breaking of a “Plank in Reason” triggers the final descent. In other words, Death finally overpowers her and here, death is a metaphor for the madness attendant upon psychic alienation and fragmentation of the woman poet due to societal repression and criticisms. Such a psychic fragmentation can be analyzed further, as attempted here:

For, in the final moments of the poem, the fall into loss of consciousness takes place when a plank in reason (the floor on which she stands, the floor of the brain) finally breaks (from the force of all that beating and treading, those boots of lead, surely), and she plummets endlessly hitting world at every plunge … until she must stop knowing. (Juhasz, *Naked and Fiery Forms* 28).

However, Dickinson’s poetry also depicts the woman writer’s firm choice of poetry as her vocation. This can be seen in her act of privileging poetry over religion and universe, when she dares to place the poets above the patriarchal God and its symbolic order:

I reckon – when I count at all –

First – Poets- Then the Sun –

Then Summer – Then the Heaven of God –
And then – the List is done – (569, 1-4)

According to her, the vocation of poetry enables her to attain a “largeness of life” that surpasses the omnipotent male sovereignty and dominion that ignores and trivializes her as a woman. As Kirkby remarks: “Dickinson’s sense of the largeness of life she elected contrasts markedly of the general view of the smallness of her life” (2). To her, it’s a choice that stands supreme to all other male prescriptions to woman. Thus, she asserts herself as a woman poet through her chosen vocation and transforms her repressive mundane life to an extraordinary magical life of poetic possibilities.

Dickinson’s determination not to compromise her poetic spirit is evident when we understand her refusal to let herself be molded in order to become an established poet. She insisted on developing her own original and distinctive style of writing and rejected the conventional style prescribed by the domineering male artists. When her mentor and friend, Thomas Wentworth Higginson rebuked her for stylistic obscurities in her poems and suggested that she undertake certain improvements in compliance with the accepted norm of writing for publication, Emily flatly refused to do so. She expresses her refusal to compromise poetic standards for publication: “…If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her – if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase – and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me – then My Barefoot – Rank is better” (L265). Persisting to write in her own terms and unconventional manner, Dickinson in her poems emphatically expresses her belief that a writer’s status as a published author automatically destroys the integrity of any writer. She cannot compromise her art, put herself for sale, and thereby reduce the human spirit to disgrace of price:
Publication – is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man –
Poverty – be justifying
For so foul a thing

.................................
In the Parcel – Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace –
But reduce no Human Spirit

To Disgrace of Price – (709, 1-4, 13-16)

The above lines express Dickinson’s self-dignity as a poet and her belief in the poet’s humanity, which does not wish to compromise with anything. She therefore gives up the poet’s natural dream to take up the “public” vocation of poet and instead, commits herself to the “White Election” of a private poet.

Dickinson’s emphasis on the poet’s uncompromising, unique spirit invariably goes into her creation of a unique poetry. In other words, Dickinson’s value as a woman poet lies in her matchless creation of femme poesy, i.e., female poetry. In brief, her poetry establishes a distinct quality of female poetry. This distinct style can be seen when one examines her poems carefully for its stylistic qualities and verbal strength.

Her style can be observed firstly in her refuting the male artist logos or laws that claim poetry as a masculine tradition and in her endeavor to assert herself as a woman poet by creating her own lexicon based on female language and female values. She is enraged with the figurative language that identifies man with language and woman with nature thereby denying woman’s place in the world of literature. She learns that her sense of
femininity originates from the masculine tradition. She is conscious that the male hierarchical language also called Adam’s language lies at the heart of male supremacy. She therefore decides to establish her femaleness in the patriarchal world and for this reason, she liberates herself from any kind of sexual determinism. With the self-created freedom, Dickinson creates her own language by aligning her linguistic powers with God, the masculine power of creation. To establish a unique female language, she first participates in the male language and then subverts them by “entertaining a long tradition of the inheritance of divine language by human language” (Homans, Women Writers and Poetic Identity 212). The above subversion of language and its male identity is done in the poem below:

A Word made Flesh is seldom
And tremulously partook
Nor then perhaps reported
But have I not mistook
Each one of us has tasted
With ecstasies of stealth
The very food debated
To our specific strength – (1651, 1-8)

Dickinson’s newly fleshed-out, non-phallocentric “Word” coheres in a divine spirit and therefore it is a language of love, equality and inclusion. As Wendy Martin points out: “T[t]he clue to Dickinson’s cosmology can be found in the contrast between condescension and consent; the former is a descent from a superior position and implies disdain while the latter indicates a harmony and accord that springs from union” (An American Triptych 117). In
other words, she implies that unlike the hierarchical language, which signifies exclusion and discrimination of woman, particularly woman’s “femininity”, her logos, is “loved Philology” based on love, inclusion and equality. Therefore, through privileging of female inclusive language over male hierarchical language, she subverts male established linguistic traditions, as seen below:

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 loved Philology. (1651, 9-16)

Through her new “loved Philology”, and philosophy, that leads to her establishing a newfound female language, Dickinson commands recognition and status for the woman artist.

The subversion of the male tradition in poetry is seen not only in her affirmation of the female tradition of language but also in her exploration of the tradition. Dickinson emphasizes the importance of nature and reverence towards life. Using the image of the flower as the female principle, she celebrates life and illuminates her growth from a passive, dependent femininity to autonomous womanhood as a woman poet:

Bloom – is Result – to meet a Flower

........................................
To pack the Bud – oppose the Worm –

Obtain its right of Dew –

Adjust the Heat- elude the Wind –

Escape the prowling Bee

Great Nature not to disappoint

Awaiting Her that Day –

To be a Flower, is profound

Responsibility – (1058, 1, 9-16)

The above poem depicts the self-assertion of the female self as a woman poet by identifying herself with a flower that has taken upon itself the “profound Responsibility” to “Bloom”. Like the flower which is “no longer dependent on male energy” for blooming but “accountable to herself” and nature, the female persona ceases to depend on the hostile male-centric culture and nourishes her own poetic energy and imagination by nurturing her female self in nature.

The images in Dickinson’s poems further establish the female tradition of poetry. In fact, women writers in general have covertly expressed their views of societal and sexual realities pertaining to their female selves through a female metaphoric tradition. Dickinson too like a typical woman writer has employed the metaphoric tradition and used innumerable images to signify the poetic female self such as the loaded gun, volcano, flower, the spider, darkness or night. She uses the spider image not only to symbolize female art and sexual decay but also the female artist’s triumphant secret self, as conferred below:

The Spider holds a Silver Ball

In unperceived Hands –
And dancing softly to Himself

His Yarn of Pearl – unwinds – (605, 1-4)

In the poem, the spider dancing softly to Himself, emphasizes the female reticence in pursuing her poetic career. The term “dancing” like spinning or weaving or sewing is another one of Dickinson’s metaphors for female art.

In addition, Dickinson defines female art as secret art like “the mental pirouettes performed in the attic of Nobodaddy’s house, the growth of an obscure underwater jewel, or, especially, a spider’s unobtrusively woven yarn of pearl” (Gilbert and Gubar, _The Madwoman in the Attic_ 634). Here the woman poet like the spider spinning softly “His Yarn of Pearl”, she also secretly revels in the triumph of her female art. Like the spider-artist sewing fine stitches in the dark, without even a light, except perhaps the inner radiance, Dickinson also relies upon her secluded private moments to exercise her poetic gifts and create immortal works of art:

A Spider sewed at Night

Upon an Arc of White.

Without a Light (1138, 1-3)

Only moments of poetic creation offer the poet a sense of living a fulfilled life and provide respite from societal repressions. The term “Physiognomy” implied here is the poet’s strategy for immortality, which is to weave a web of varying characters, a net of masks, to attract and entrap lasting fame:

Of Immortality

His Strategy

Was Physiognomy. (1138, 7-9)
Metaphors in Dickinson’s poetry help understand the poetic personality. Images like sun, daylight, night or darkness highlight the psychic fantasies of the poet who emphasizes that persona is poetic. These metaphors can be linked to the poet’s personality – her reclusiveness and agoraphobia – fear of public places and open places. According to Barker, it indicates “her fear of all the sun and its light had come to represent: constraining expectations and judgments, as well as debilitating seduction, abandonment, and destruction” (75). Such shunning of the light by the poet reveals an identification with what she calls in her poem, “…Races nurtured in the Dark” (581, 5). It is an “identification that provides a metaphoric room of her own” which allows her “what Virginia Woolf called moments of ‘being’ as opposed to moments of ‘non-being’” (Barker 75). Hence, her identification with darkness shows not only Dickinson’s “politics of refusal to engage in a world dominated by a prosaic, patriarchal and prescriptive sun but also a poetics of acceptance, even assertion, of her position as a woman writer” (75):

Unto us – the Suns extinguish –

To our Opposite –

New Horizons – they embellish

Fronting Us – with Night. (972, 5-8)

For Dickinson, the day/light was specifically associated with specifically gender-related constricting obligations and expectations and hence she preferred the silent night/darkness where the private artistic possibilities is heightened for a woman writer. Poetry as a private space and night/darkness as conducive to woman’s artistic creation are stressed here:

Rests at Night
The Sun from shining,
Nature – and some Men –
Rest at Noon – some Men –
While Nature
And the Sun – go on – (714, 1-7)

Here, in the above poem the poet paradoxically implies that her life as a woman writer is most active while the inhabitants of the patriarchal sun’s world are most passive. The resting hours of ‘Men’ are woman’s seasons and times of poetic creativity.

Metaphors in her poetry help create her private space as poet that she conceives as “divine”, “queen”, or “witch”. For example, darkness for Dickinson is the madness of the “divinest sense”, the “Lunacy of light” that bestows her with poetic and imaginative accomplishments. In addition, “Lunacy” suggests lunar or the moon’s enchanting light that magically transforms the ordinary bees into beautiful butterflies. In other words, it means a light under which she can grow as majestic as the queen. Further, this knowledge of the forces of darkness enables her to find a literary tradition of her own and a deity of her own (in successful literary women as Elizabeth Browning and Charlotte Bronte) in the only room of her own - the “feminine” darkness. Wendy Barker rightly sums up: “Recognizing her membership in those female ‘Races – nurtured in the Dark’, she defines herself as a poet who must retreat from the hostile world of sunlit business into the spacious, subterranean, divinely insane sphere of the dark” (101).

At times darkness signifies the time of the witch, who creates her witchcraft. Such an idea of darkness associated with poetic creation on the one
hand and witchcraft on the other hand, signifies mockery of the idea that woman’s poetic creation is witchcraft. This idea can be derived by the sense of horror experienced in the following verse:

The Horror not to be surveyed –
But skirted in the Dark –
With Consciousness suspended –
And Being under Lock – (777, 9-12)

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