Emily Dickinson and her contemporaries

"Emily Dickinson", in the words of Jhon F. Lynen, "is a baffling poet because she seems to bear little or no relation to the historical period within which she worked. She stands apart, as indifferent to the literary movements of her day as to its great events". 1

But another critic H.H. Waggoner has something quite different to say about her. He writes : "There are a very few American poets either before or after her ; whose work is not suggested somewhere in hers, whose images she did not try out, whose insights she did not recapitulate, criticise, or anticipate". 2

How relevant these opinions are, can only be ascertained when Emily Dickinson is placed along with her contemporary American poets, specifically Walt Whitman ; a comparison which will be studied in some detail.

Emily Dickinson's interest in contemporary American poets was superficial at best. With the exception of perhaps Emerson, no other contemporary poet of America impressed her.

"We do not have much poetry (here at home)" 3, she complained to her brother in 1851.

When T.H. Higginson, then the editor of 'The Atlantic', had asked Emily Dickinson if she had read this new andacious poet,

3. Letters, P. 161
her reply was in the form of a letter where she wrote, "you speak of Mr. Whitman - I never read his Book - but was told he was disgraceful".  

In fact, for the entire New York literary scene of which Whitman was a part, Emily Dickinson cared very little. Nonetheless the two were contemporaries. Their poetry belonged to the same cultural period. It was a phase when poetry became a curative for society, when established doctrines were abandoned, when the question of individual integrity became a serious matter, when one was besieged by the idea of impermanence. Hence it is not illogical to imagine that she shares some rather definite intellectual characteristics with Walt Whitman. They both preferred to present themselves as spiritual adventurers. To them, writing was an art which performed the sacred task of exposing an unique personality.

They both appeared to have held that a poem, when created out of a certain special, living experience, gains authenticity. The individual consciousness gains priority over all, in the works of both Whitman and Emily Dickinson. They seemed to have felt that the poets effort is successful when it is capable of causing an upheaval in society. So their inclination is markedly towards antigeneres resulting in the fragmentary quality and the sense of incompleteness of Emily Dickinson's poetry, and the defiance of all metrical canons in Whitman's.

Even in the face of such general affinities it would be inappropriate to call Emily Dickinson "a feminine Walt Whitman", as some readers did in the 1890's. Emily Dickinson chose to be a "recluse" and Whitman claimed to be a spokesman - poet for all America.

4. Letters, p. 404 (April, 26, 1862)
The 'Erdic Symbols', like a majority of Whitman's early poems, places him in the presumptuous role of a self-appointed spokesman. His definition of ideas like - the Self, God, America - are matched to satisfy his own personal needs. He has even dared to make such prophetic statements like -

"America is isolated yet embodying all, what is it finally except myself ?"

Whitman is not just Whitman the poet, but America personified, he and the nation becomes one. He created an ideal out of his own personal desires and then named it "America". In the preface to the Leaves of Grass, 1855, he writes -

"The (Poet's) spirit responds to his country's spirit ... ..... he incarnates its geography and natural life .... to him enter the essences of the real things and past and present events - of enormous diversity ...."^5

So the poet is not merely a myth-maker, he is also a prophet, a man with a very sacred and serious mission in life. According to Whitman the poet or other artists alone can give "the ultimate verification to facts, to science, and to common lives endowing them with glows and glories and final illustriousness which belongs to every real thing, and to real things only ..... .. without this ultimate verification reality would seem to be incomplete and science, democracy and life itself, finally in vain".^6 It is a summing up of Whitman's growing sense of the power of poetry and thus of the poet.

Emily Dickinson was never the self appointed Messiah

6. Ibid.
that Whitman was. In fact she was very much a 'private poet', deliberately detached from the literary scene of her time. Emily Dickinson's poetic experiences were imaginatively created around certain symbols derived out of her life and readings. For her poetry was not so much a means of self expression as it was means of probing and analyzing the existence she was to lead. The 'Centre' and 'Circumference' form the major components of her literary symbols, the understanding of which is necessary to interpret her poems. She remarks that the Bible is the 'Centre' and 'My business is Circumference'.

The Bible prescribe for man a world where there is a promise of an Eden after death where man will live eternally. Emily Dickinson could not come to terms with such an idea of a life in paradise after death. For her, both religion and God must be a part of her in the presence of which she must be at peace and find joy.

Since her encounter with the 'Centre' makes her feel alien, she creates through her imaginative consciousness the world of her 'circumference'. Under this new religious consciousness Emily Dickinson completely identifies hereself with nature. Nature now becomes for her the paradise. In this Paradise of her imagination the inhabitants -

"..... dance and game, / And gambol
....../ Employ their holiday". (J. 24)

The people of the "Mystic Green" (J.24) are able to make their moments of bliss eternal.

Surrounding the 'Circumference' of human consciousness, says Emily Dickinson is a still greater consciousness which she describes as 'Awe'. 'Awe' is her personal name for 'God', and her relationship with 'Awe' is like bride to the bridegroom, or sea to the moon.
For Emily Dickinson poetry became an essence for the redemption of life, for she had abandoned belief in the conventional church, God, and the Bible. So the only means of establishing the relation of her soul to her God, whom she conceived as 'Absolute Reality', was poetry.

She was doubtful about the idea of eternal happiness in Heaven after death. For her the boundaries of her Paradise are within her own mind. So the important fact about her religious experience is the vision of earth as Heaven, and the second important fact is that the vision is not permanent, -

"I've known a Heaven, like a Tent
To wrap its shining Yards -
Pluck up its stakes, and disappear
Without the sound of Boards ". (J. 243)

Such a vision comes and goes unpredictably.

Man's terror of death is deeply rooted in his sense of sin. People differ invariably in their speculation about the consequence of death. For some the only consequence of death is total annihilation, a thought most dismal and terrifying. For others death is the merging of the soul with the Ultimate soul or Reality. For the rest immortality is the natural sequel to death. But common to all is the wish to maintain a healthy spiritual life until the time of departing from this world arrives.

But the new generation of this scientific and mechanical world remains sceptical about death's sequel, for they no longer believe as their fore-bearers believed about death and its consequences. Walt Whitman foresaw and prophesized the coming of such a time. He himself was sceptical about life after death, very much like Emily Dickinson. To quote Jung, "One has to be close to death
to acquire the necessary freedom to talk about it.\(^7\)

This was exactly the position of Emily Dickinson. Her concern with death was partly gained by experience and partly by reflection. Emily Dickinson is obviously much more daring than Whitman, in her approach to death. Her obsession with death turned at times to morbidity and it took more than interest on her part to make her eager for details after the death of a friend. But her concern for death was not philosophical. It was purely poetical. The poem "Because I Could not Stop for Death", is an example of a metaphysical conceit. The single image of the bridal journey is used to describe the funeral procession which is viewed as a journey to eternity. And again,

"Behind Me - dips Eternity -
Before Me - Immortality -
Myself - the term between ". (J.721)

So eternity is the end of the journey and immortality is, according to Emily Dickinson "Mind without corporeal frame". One part of the self is mortal and the other part immortal. But both the parts must go through death to achieve rebirth into an eternal state of consciousness.

In the Bible death is seen as means of separating man from God, due to man's sinful ways. Emily Dickinson takes a positive view of this idea by trying to glorify life. She treats death in a personal manner but with certain reservations about an after life. Even in the face of anguish and sorrow Emily Dickinson's preference is for an earthly existence and in many of her poems she weighs the earth against Heaven.

\(^7\) C.D. Jung : Memories, Dreams, Reflection, (New York : The Fontana Library, 1972)
In contrast to Emily Dickinson's scepticism, Walt Whitman holds a strong and solid affirmation that death is a phase of transition— a natural transition to re-birth. The thought of death was clearly the chief threat his vision had to overcome. So a major theme of Walt Whitman's poetry between 1855 to 1858 is the poet's victory over death. In Song of Myself he presents himself not as an immortal soul temporarily inhabiting a mortal body and struggling to live in a world of diversions:

"I have heard what the talkers, were talking, the talk of the begging and the end
But I do not talk of the begging or the end
There was never anymore inception than there is now.
Nor any more youth or age than there is now
And will never be any perfection than there is now".

('Song of Myself')

But Whitman understands death as a cosmic process, as a continual loss through death and consequent gain of death—in-life. To quote John Snyder,

"One of this poem's ('Song of Myself') major thrust, along with so many others in Leaves of Grass, is that if death is the end of life, both its goal and annihilation, than life would seem to be absurd and empty .... In 'Song of Myself' grass is a constant sign of life and death collapsed into the process ...... And Whitman's tacit argument when he establishes this symbolic parity is that life and death are one because they both are, because they both have being. Death's being fills the void of life's being"8 In section 6, of 'Song

of Myself'; Whitman's search for the identity of the grass is evident following the questioning of the child -

" A child said what is the grass?
. . . . . . I do not
Know what it is anymore than he ". (90 -91)

Whitman goes through a series of speculations about the possible meaning of grass -

" I guess it must be the flag of my disposition,
Out of hopeful green staff woven.
Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord
A scented gift . . . . . designedly dropped . . . ".

Ultimately what appears vital to Whitman is not the identity of the grass but to identify it with the meaning of life. He finally settles on an answer with the assertion that grass symbolizes the totality of living and dead men -

"Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Yuckahoe, Congressmen, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.
And now it seems to me the beautiful circuit hair of graves". (Song of Myself', 1. 99-101)

The following lines are a triumphant assertion of the poet, of his understanding of life as a continual loss through death and a consequent gain of death in life.

" They are alive and well somewhere;
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And even if there was it led forward life,
and does not wait
at the end to arrest it,
And ceased the moment life appeared.
( 'Song of Myself', II.116-119)

" Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" from the 'Sea Drift' section of Whitman's poems, presents the mother sea as the grave as well as the womb. The poem notes Whitman's early realization of death as a boy.
At the Surface level the poem describes the separation of two mocking-birds. After the disappearance of the she-mocking-bird, all summer along the he-mocking-bird sings a song of unsatisfied love. The boy poet moved by the song translates this song, and at its completion the boy is-

"... Ecstatic with his bare feet the waves / with his hair the atmosphere dallying. The love in the heart long past, now loose, now at last tumultously bursting." 9

The boy-poet grasps the meaning of this experience which is the knowledge of his 'tongue's use' and the conviction that it will never cease uttering a thousand other songs "clearer, louder and more sorrowful" (1. 163)

The boy's experience of one song has opened a promising, gateway for the entrance of a 'thousand songs'. The philosophy of this experience is that, a single experience has unlocked innumerable doors making it possible for further new experiences.

"O give me the clew; (it lurks in the night somewhere here)"

O if I am to have so much, let me have more;" 10

The sea whispers to him in answer the "strong and delicious word - death". The sea represents the wisdom of death. The presentation of the sea as a gently rocking cradle - endlessly rocking provide with the theme of death and re-birth. 'Cradle' itself is highly suggestive of birth and life. The implied cycle is, - cradle-death-birth.

9. 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking'
10. 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking'
The message of the sea for the boy is "Death, death, death, death, death," (1. 173) while the bird teaches him love. The word 'death' is "the word final Superior to all ", the 'clew' the boy-poet searches for. This 'clew' awakens in the boy a 'thousand responses'. Once he unearths the meaning of life which is "death", the boy-poet is never the same innocent lad - "never again leave me to be the peaceful boy I was before".

He has now become the poet the "Uniter of here and after ". Walt Whitman finds in death the ultimate truth of life, the key to life and re-birth.

Emily Dickinson's theme of death is interrelated to the theme of love, and these themes are again intimately associated with her concept of God. In fact it can rightly be mentioned here, that the finest of Emily Dickinson's love poems have their root in her religious consciousness. True relationship of the poet's consciousness to a "Greater consciousness" with whom the union is possible only in paradise, is a major point of her conception of love -

"These Fleshless lovers met -
A Heaven in a gaze -
A Heaven of Heavens - the privilege
of one another's eyes - ". (J. 625)

Whitman too, establishes a link between love and death.

In the 'Calamus' section, the poem "Scented Herbage of my Breast". stands as an explicit proclamation of this relationship between love and death. "Death is beautiful . . . . . . (What indeed is finally beautiful except death and love ?") (1. 17).

Since love is the truth of life, the heart of the poem is a genuinely tragic recognition that to live is to love, and to love is to lose. Love is the beginning of life and also its end. This acknowledgment lifts the poet to a kind of exaltation and death becomes
beautiful to him. Walt Whitman's love is so strong that it must find some means of release. Since life denies this fulfilment, death is the only way open to it.

"The high soul of lovers welcomes death most" (1.24) since to love is to lose. The final secret of life is reserved for the lovers that the 'real reality' of life is love and death. The poem implies that man is born for defeat because the need of the heart is not met by life. So the only course open to him is to stoically meet his fate.

"Death or life I am indifferent - my soul declines to prefer " (1. 23)

The exaltation is the exaltation of passing beyond hope and illusion to a knowledge of what life and death finally are. Death is welcomed because it is the ultimate truth of life. Walt Whitman also wrote about sex, frequently and with a frank enthusiasm, which earned for him the reputation of being 'disgraceful' His writing in 1855 - "the procreant urge of the world . . . . always sex, . . . . always a breed of life", stuck as a nastily image practically in every body's mind. But to him the subject of sex was a form of literary realism and he wrote about it repeatedly.

"Through me forbidden voices, Voices of sexes and lust, voices Veiled and I remove the veil."

(Song of Myself)

It cannot be said that Emily Dickinson totally neglected the sexual aspect of a man/woman relationship. She wrote about desire with an almost equivalent interest as Whitman -

No man moved me - till the Tide Went past my Simple shoe - And past my Apron - and my Belt
And past my Boddice too -
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And made as He would eat me up ". (J. 520)

But hers are not the kind of sexual poems that can be called revolutionary like Whitman's. Her sexual statements are subtle and are hence often overlooked and easily forgotten.

Since Emily Dickinson's "business is circumference', Her pre-occupation is the human consciousness. She remarks that the Bible is the 'Centre' and her concern is the "Circumference". Her poetic outpourings are the brilliant pleasures she experienced in the process of disregarding the doctrines and discarding the conventionally accepted Christian God and dogma. But a deeply religious poet like Emily Dickinson was in constant search of a religion and God to fall back upon. So she evolved for herself a personal religion in the presence of which she feels perfectly at ease. Talking about her personal God with childlike simplicity she writes -

"God is indeed a Jealous God - " (J.1719) or calls Him "Papa above ;" (J. 16) It is again, her feeling of closeness to God which leads her to remark of Him as "Banker, Burglar, Father", (J. 49) or think of Him as her "Dim companion". (J. 275)

For Walt Whitman, God whether be a person or a divinity, or a life-force, expresses Himself in the spirit and passions of man.

"And I say to mankind, be not curious about God ..... I see God each hour of twenty four .... In the faces of men and women. I see God and in my own face in the glass". ("Song of Myself"), section 48).

Walt Whitman's God is all encompassing. he expresses identification with God, with all men and women and with nature's variety.

"And I know that the hand of God is the
Promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of god is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers,
And that a Kelson of the creation is love,
And limitless are leaves stiff or dropping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of worm fence, heap'd stones, elder, mullein and poke-weed"  

(Song of Myself'-section5)

Such a mystical experience leads Walt Whitman to a form of belief, it is a revelation that the self is inseparable from its Creator - God. Here Walt Whitman exhibits, as many critics believe, a marked affinity with the Hindu Vedantic thought. Malcolm Cowley in his "Introduction to Whitman's complete Verse and prose", (1948) suggests that 'Song of Myself' is better understood when considered in relation to the greater mystical philosophy of India as expounded in the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads.

Cowley is not alone in discovering this striking kinship between Whitman and the ancient Hindu scriptures in thought and experience. Quite a few American readers of Leaves of Grass over these one hundred years have recognized these correspondences. When Thoreau read it in 1855, he remarked that the book was "wonderfully like the Orientals", and Emerson found in it a mixture of the Bhagavad Gita and the New York Herald. There is no established evidence that Walt Whitman had any first hand knowledge of the Hindu Scriptures. The only direct evidence of his enthusiasm for India is perhaps his poem "Passage to India", but it reveals no precise knowledge about the country. Yet there exists a strong affinity between his thought and the Hindu Vadas. The 'Self' that is the Vedantic 'Atman' or the individual
soul is inseparable from its creator or the Vedantic "Brahma" - the supreme soul of creation. The soul or 'Atman', and the creator or 'Brahma' is one, each is a manifestation of the other. Considering the point that America showed considerable enthusiasm for Hindu philosophical ideas; it is likely that Walt Whitman read the English translated version of the Bhagavad Gita which became available there by the time he wrote Leaves of Grass.

Any study of Emily Dickinson would remain incomplete without referring to Ralph Waldo Emerson, another contemporary poet and essayist. His contribution to the development of American literature make him an important figure in its history. Emerson had an astonishing effect upon his contemporaries. It was Emerson who was responsible for bringing Whitman "to a boil", after he read his (Emerson's) essays.

Emerson convinced both Whitman and Emily Dickinson that poetry had the power of transforming the habits of perception and thereby bringing in new light into the world. Emerson saw the poet as "an Emperor in his own right". He further says: "The poet has a new thought, he has a whole new experience to unfold, he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet".¹¹

While Whitman's idea of the poet is similar to that of Emerson's, as the preface of Leaves of Grass, (1855) proves; Emily Dickinson never felt so seriously about the role of the poet. Perhaps that is why she preferred to stay away from the lime-light.

Emerson's essays about Love', 'Nature', 'Friendship', 'The Oversoul', 'Art', can be termed as a granary of intellectual ideas. Even Emily Dickinson, who declared to have no interest in her American male counterparts, could not escape the impression of Emerson's writing.

Nevertheless, Emily Dickinson's unique writing on various subjects of Death, Love, God, Nature and Immortality, proves that she was beyond being impressed, and that she cared little or nothing at all for the literary standard of her time, or of anybody else's views of these.

In his essay on "Love", Ralph Waldo Emerson talks explicitly about the all encompassing quality of love, and how central it is to life.

"Love is our highest word, and the synonym of God .... seizes on man . . . . and works a revolution in his mind and body; unites him to his race, pledges life to the domestic and civil relations, carries him with new sympathy into nature, enhances the power of the senses, pens the imagination, adds to his character heroic and sacred attributes, establishes marriage, and gives permanence to human society ..... ".

In contrast to this somewhat practical approach of Emerson, Emily Dickinson's attitude towards love is markedly idealistic, her lover is no ordinary man, but she is the "Bride of Awe". When lovers meet they are "fleshless". Love has its roots in her religious consciousness. So she misses out the poignancy and burning desire of the physical side of love in almost all her love poems. Even wherever sex is hinted at , it is done in a most decorous manner. It appears that Emily Dickinson has given love a spiritual magnitude and a religious overtone.
Emerson's affirmation about spiritual love is as strong as that of Emily Dickinson's as it finds expression in such beautiful lines as -

"One beautiful soul' becomes the door through which all true and pure souls' may be apprehended and cherished .... " 12.

Just the same, Emerson was never squeamish about sex though he showed no undue interest in it, in the narrow sense. He recognized frankly the importance of the power to rouse passion. So he writes in one of his poems that love is futile minus its electrifying quality to drive one mad" with sweet desire."

Emily Dickinson's "Absolute Reality", and Emerson's "oversoul", are synonymous terms. These are personal names given by the poets to address God. Abandoning the Christian God and dogma, Emily Dickinson created her own homely God and religion to cater to her needs.

Emerson's 'Oversoul' is God, whom he sees incarnated in Man. Emerson's faith in God is explicitly expressed when he says "I and the Father are one", Nature too, appeared to Emerson as" a projection of God in the unconscious", an inferior incarnation of the Divine than that which have been achieved in man. Emily Dickinson's approach to Nature is refreshingly new, having the bees, winds, birds and bobolinks, within the circumference of her consciousness. In comparison to Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman’s attitude towards Nature is never so personal. It is undeniable that he uses the sea, the mocking birds, the leaves and grass, and trees, as a means to express many of his personal ideas and experiences. Walt Whitman sees God manifested in Nature and man. So, for him there is a close affinity

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between man, Nature and God. Whitman at best is a visionary, and sees beyond his world to what it might be. According to him nature mirrors the one single and ultimate truth of life, which is death.

Apparently, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman complement each other, and appear rather co-operative in their artistic strategies of defiance of conventions.

While Emily Dickinson's revolt is that of 'inwardness' and self-imposed isolation from society, Whitman's defiance of it assumed a missionary zeal. His attempt was to create "an ideal out of his own personal desires and then advertise it as "America" for popular consumptions".  

In resisting the powerful current of an European tradition, American poetry began to make its own waves. Whitman was the chief Oarsman. He never looked back with longing at London he had never seen, or at the Europe he had never revered. Others followed him - some obviously, some secretly; and a singular poet Emily Dickinson, wrote out of a situation so universal that it was beyond nationality. She was a child of Puritan New England, born too late to live by the inherited formula of Puritanism. In contrast to Whitman who inherited nothing and was free to welcome the new age, Emily Dickinson faced her age and background with the desperation of one who feared to lose anything because of her sensitive and non-conformist nature.