CHAPTER – IV

THE POETIC TECHNIQUE OF EMILY DICKINSON

Egbert. S. Oliver observes Emily Dickinson as,

She died before Whitman, Melville, Holmes, Lowell and in the same decade with Emerson, Long fellow, Whittier; and yet her poems find their proper and congenial associations in the twentieth century – at least in many aspects of their style and form.¹

The poetry of Emily impresses the readers because of its freshness, vigour and vitality. Her themes are dealt no doubt in a unique way, but at the same time her language also displays a higher level of idiosyncrasy.

Many of her poems seem to be dramatic monologues which represent the various faces of human emotion – belief and doubt, hope and despair etc. She did not address her poems to anyone individual but even if she wanted she would use short sentences. Though her poems seem to be taciturn, they actually rendered a lot about her. She did not want to express all her feelings and emotions directly, so one can observe that her poems are compressed and simplicity, shortness, preciseness etc have become the main features of her poetic style. One such poem of just one stanza of four lines is,

It's such a little thing to weep,

So short a thing to sigh;
And yet by trades the size of these
We men and women die.
(It's such a little thing to weep)

Emily did not actually write for the sake of writing poetry but her experiences and situations made her to put her emotions in a poetic form. Being an introvert she could not share her feelings with anyone, so she considered poetry to be the best companion of hers. Her technique is basically American, content as well as the method.

S.S. Chopra has the following to say about Emily Dickinson’s writing,

Emily Dickinson was one of the most original writers of her time who, with her vivid imagination and playful spirit, made a perfect display of variegated poetic techniques. She was in no way out to satisfy the aesthetic sense of the reader but possessed a ‘sharp stabbing’ quality which baffled and perplexed the reader.²

The most remarkable aspect of her poems is the use of dashes. These dashes have led to many different interpretations of her poems. She uses these dashes so vividly that you can see them in almost of all her poems. They not only make the reader ponder over the meaning of its use but also make them to probe into the mind of the poet to actually understand what they mean. Kamilla Denman observes the use of the ‘Dash’ in Emily’s poems in the following way,
Dickinson's transition from a dominant use of the exclamation mark to a preference for the dash accompanied her shift from ejaculatory poems, which seem outcries aimed with considerable dramatic effect at God or others, to poems where the energies exist more in the relationships between words and between the poet and her words. In this intensely prolific period, Dickinson’s excessive use of dashes has been interpreted variously as the result of great stress and intense emotion, as the indication of a mental breakdown, and as a mere idiosyncratic, female habit.  

So, one can observe that it is because of the sensitive issues related to God and religion and also sorrowful issues of death and immortality, that her poetry at times becomes ambiguous by the use of dashes in strange situations. These dashes also lead to different connotations by the reader. One of her poems which shows extensive use of dashes is,  

She lay as if at play  
Her life had leaped away –  
Intending to return –  
But not so soon –  

Her merry Arms, half dropt –  
As if for lull of sport –  
An instant had forgot –  
The trick to start –  
Her dancing Eyes – ajar –
As if their Owner were
Still sparkling through
For fun – at you –

Her Morning at the door –
Devising, I am sure –
To force her sleep –
So light – so deep –”

(She lay as if at Play)

In this poem, the use of dashes certainly seem to surprise the readers but at the same time helps the readers to wait for a while after each line to capture and analyze the depth of each line. Though Emily uses very simple vocabulary here she conveys a lot through these undescriptive lines. The picture of the dead child suddenly comes in front of the readers through this vivid description. The true pathos here is developed by the play of words. Emily seems to put the readers at work by using these dashes. She does not want to convey her thoughts openly but rather wants others to interpret in their own ways. The reader in order to come to a proper conclusion had to take a journey in the mind of the poet, Emily. Moreover one can observe in this poem that she uses only monosyllabic and disyllabic and only few trisyllabic words. The metre of the poem is also short and so seems to move quickly. Pickard comments on the use of her dash,

Far more perplexing is her use of dashes, for this device is intimately connected with meaning, musical effects, and overall tone. This
eccentricity often defeats the meaning, for it is difficult to determine when the dashes indicate a metrical pause or when they are to be treated as commas, semicolons or periods. Again in the holographs the length and slant of the dashes vary so much that a final interpretation is impossible. 4

Emily's poems have many faults in her technique this may be cause Emily did not have a mentor to guide and correct in her poetic process. Her manner was odd and private and even her technique was improper, in spite of this, she wrote, she wrote to console her body and soul, to console her heart and mind. She was not afraid of any criticism, she herself says in one of her letters,

While my poems are full of faults, . . . they have my heart and life in them: they are not empty shells.....poetry has been as serious a thing to me as life itself; and life has been a very serious thing: there has been no playing at skittles for me in either. I never mistook pleasure for the final cause of poetry; nor leisure, for the hour of the poet. I have done my work, so far, as work – not as mere hand and head work apart from the personal being, but as the completest expression of that being to which I could attain.

Emily was her own philosopher and guide, so in spite of so many oddities, her place is almost equal to Walt Whitman in American literature. It was her appeal rather than the technique that moved her readers. Her appeal was genuine with which she discovered her own techniques, created new
meanings for the words in order to suit the requirements of her personal
thoughts. Regarding the faulty poetic technique of Emily, James Reeves says,

What has been forgotten by some critics is that she never certainly
gave any of her poems a final form, never polished them for the press,
ever made a selection for publication, never had the occasion, as most
poets have, to destroy her failures. She never had the benefit of
competent, professional guidance, and – what is worse for a poet – she
lacked the friendship of fellow craftsmen which would have afforded
that free exchange of opinion and criticism, praise and censure, which
alone affords a healthy climate for poetic growth. As she said to
Higginson, “I have none to ask,”...Hopkins knew that Bridges could
not understand his poetic aims and methods, but at least he could
discuss them and argue about them. Emily had only her own
judgement to consult.5

The genuine appeal of Emily resulted in the emergence of her poetic
personality. She did not want deliberately to break up the tradition of her
contemporaries but wanted freedom of thought and expression where she can
pour out her feelings. She seems to follow the famous definition of poetry by
the Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, “Poetry is the emotions recollected in
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tranquility.”

She treats the themes of death and immortality very freely in her poems,
they seem to vary from one poem to another. She has hope as well as doubt of
immortality. She seems to be on the side of God but again rejects Him. She views the dead as cold, immobile, silent etc. In the following poem, Emily uses a set of antonyms “slow x rapid” ; “timid x bold” to address her soul advising it to escape from Death,

“Go slow, my soul, to feed thyself
Upon his rare approach –
Go rapid, lest Competing Death
Prevail upon the coach –

Go timid, lest his final eye
Determine thee amiss –
Go boldly – for thou pays’t his price
Redemption – for a kiss-”

(Go Slow, My Soul, to Feed Thyself)

One can also observe the irregularity of rhyme scheme in this poem. Though she makes a good attempt of finding set of perfect rhymes like ‘approach-coach’; ‘amiss – kiss’, she fails to provide rhymes for other set of words. This poem also in one way expresses the doubt of the poet whether to approach death or run away from it. Her form of poetic writing makes S.S.Chopra comment that,

Like the best of the modern poets, Emily evolved a way of her own with words. She coined and created new words, skillfully manoeuvring them to suit her purpose, thus collapsing the syntax, springing the
rhythm and slanting the rhymes. Words sprang as it were from the inner fountains of her heart and she gradually discovered her poetic powers through the miracles of language. She developed a style which made her poems breathe.6

Dickinson’s poetic brilliance lies in the meticulous selection of words she makes to bring out both the internal and external meanings. For example in the poem “Because I could Not stop for Death,” Emily uses the picture of a lover leading his beloved in a carriage, but this is the surface meaning. When one starts probing in the poem deeply then it becomes clear that the lover is immortality and she is being carried in the carriage of death. If the beginning line of the poem was devoid of the word “Death” she would not have been able to convey the real thought of hers,

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –

Analyzing this poem, S.S. Chopra comments about the beginning of this poem,

Compression, aphorism and epigrammaticality are Dickinson’s tools with which she proceeds. Without any preparation or apology, she takes the reader by surprise by her abrupt beginnings and by the sharp sudden zigzags.7

This poem is also considered to be the most technically perfect poem of all Emily's poems. It has characters, scene, setting, a compassionate theme and

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above all a narrative structure. She uses strange and beautiful epithets to address ‘death’.

Allen Tate, in ‘Reactionary Essay’s says about this poem as it, is one of the greatest in the English language, it is flawless to the last detail. The rhythm charges with movement the pattern of suspended action back of the poem. Every image is precise, and moreover, not merely beautiful, but inextricably fused with the central idea. Every image extends and intensifies every other.”

But some critics have found the ending of the poem as ambiguous as it does not clearly state whether ‘Eternity’ was craved for or did it scare the poet.

Emily Dickinson is best known for her lyrics. She could not prove her genius in long, narrative poems which need structural coherence and organic unity. Generally poets use lyric to express their profound emotions. Emily does not rule out emotions totally but presents them in a deliberate way. She frees her lyrics from romantic exuberance of emotions. She feels that intense suffering can be better conveyed through silence instead of hysterical outbursts.

In her poem, “After great pain a formal feeling comes,” she excellently portrays the picture of human life where a person, after experiencing a long term of pain grows to be so stoic that the pain ceases leading to utter numbness of senses till the moment death seizes away his soul,

After great pain a formal feeling comes –

The nerves sit ceremonious like tombs;

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The stiff Heart questions – was it He that bore?
And yesterday – or centuries before?
The feet, mechanical, go round
A wooden way
Of ground, or air, or ought,
Regardless grown,
A quartz contentment, like a stone.
This is the hour of lead
Remembered if outlived,
As freezing persons recollect the snow –
First chill – then stupor – then the letting go.”

(After great pain a formal feeling comes)

The entire idea of this poem is conveyed through this last line. Though
the three stanzas seem to present individual states, they are all combined into
one single line at the last. The structure of the poem also changes along with
the tone and meaning of the lines. It is smooth in the first stanza with only two
dashes; in the second stanza, there is no break up of the lines and in the final
stanza especially last line where the central idea is conveyed is broken into
three parts – each part having its own identity but again interlinked with each
other.

Emily shows her genius in selecting the words which outwardly may
seem to be irrelevant and inappropriate but the deeper you probe, the better you
understand. Thomas W. Ford has the following to say about her choice of words,

The heart of her technique, whether planned or instinctive, was her selection and arrangement of words in a poetic structure. An intense interest in words as such was central to her poetics. Her ability to let words mould and shape each other in context, the interplay of the various connotations of her words, their interaction on one another—here is the core of her "style."  

Emily's poem, "I heard a fly buzz when I died," perhaps is the best example of the imagery and symbolism she used. It actually pathetically and at the same time anxiously presents the atmosphere of death in and around the physical and mental state of the victim.

I heard a fly buzz—when I died—
The stillness in the Room
Was like the stillness in the air
Between the Heaves of storm.

The eyes besides—had wrung them dry—
And Breaths were gathering sure
For that last Onset, when the king
Be witnessed in his power.

I willed my keepsakes, signed away
What portion of me be
Could make assignable,- and then
There interposed a fly –
With blue, uncertain, stumbling Buzz,
Between the light and me;
And then the windows failed, and then
I could not see to see-”

(I Heard a fly buzz – When I Died)

What one can observe in this poem is the play of the words i.e. the use of one of the figures of speech ‘Pun’. For example the word “Stillness” here indicates the static atmosphere of the room as well as the heart as it now needs to take rest forever. Similarly the word “room” also has a special significance and is used to indicate in two different stanzas – in the 1st stanza ‘room’ indicates the general room where the person is lying on the death bed, whereas in the 2nd stanza ‘room’ indicates the final resting place, the abode of every human at the end of his life i.e. the grave. ‘The King’ here is used to address God who would appear only after one’s death.

There are many other significant aspects in this poem, that need to be addressed. A Fly though a very small and insignificant insect is metaphorically used here to indicate the disturbances and problems in the mind of the poet which do not allow her even to embrace death peacefully.

The imagery used by the poet in this short poem of 16 lines is of far reaching significance. She uses the image of the colour ‘blue’ which indicates
sadness and depression. It adds a more melancholic tone to the poem. Another poem, where Emily makes use of the image ‘blue’ is ‘I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed,” in it she says,

Inebriate of Air – am I,
And debauchee of dew,
Reeling, through endless summer days,
From inns of Molten blue.

(I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed)

Death, made Emily conscious of every moment of her life, so she always seems to be in a hurry. She felt as if ‘death’ always stood behind her, ready to knock her down at any moment it wants. She herself wrote to T.W.Higginson, “Shortness to live has made me bold.” But she wasn’t afraid of ‘death’ rather she was eager to embrace it. And this eagerness is depicted in her verse with lot of anxiety. T.W.Ford recognizes this as follows,

Even her use of the dash reflects – and conveys – a feeling of haste and urgency. Impatient with punctuation, afraid to slow down her creative thought, she placed a dash wherever she desired. In similar fashion she omitted auxiliary verbs, brushing them aside boldly to hasten her conclusion. Her fondness for the subjunctive, too, seems to be in keeping with her persistent attitude of doubt.”

One of her poems which is suggestive of her haste, goes as following.
Why should we hurry – why indeed
When everyway we fly
We are molested equally
By Immortality.

Another remarkable aspect of her poetry which marks her poetry as obscure besides using of dashes, abrupt beginnings, absurd climaxes etc is the capitalization of words. One can observe in her poems, the frequent use of capital letters. She capitalized important words like nouns, adjectives, verbs and even adverbs. Her intention beside this capitalization may be to emphasis a particular word or create her own technique of writing a verse. But sometimes this capitalization may mislead the readers as to which word is prominent in the poem, which actually forms the crux of the poem. For example, let us consider a small poem of just 2 stanzas of 4 lines each,

The Bustle in a House
The Morning after Death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon Earth –

The Sweeping up the Heart
And putting Love away
We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity.”

(The Bustle in a House)
This poem has 17 capital letters in total 8 nouns, 3 verbs, 1 pronoun, 1 preposition, 1 conjunction and 3 articles. Leaving away the words which occur in the beginning of the lines we are left over with 9 words with capital letters. She might have used the capitals in the line beginnings to give freshness to each line and this is a common feature, which appears in all of her poems. But the remaining 8 are nouns which seem to be equally important in conveying the thought of the reader – like the ‘Bustle’ indicates the mental as well as physical disturbances, ‘House’ indicates a home where death has recently visited, ‘Morning’ is actually a mourning morning because of ‘Death,’ ‘Earth’ which sees the drama of death almost everyday, ‘Heart’ which bears the suffering of the departed ‘Love’ and at last of course ‘Eternity’ i.e. immortality (the flood subject of Emily). And the one left over word is a verb ‘sweeping’ which indicates the pushing away of a soul from the body, resulting in death, and leading to immortality.

So, it is clear that Emily attached importance to so many words in her verse that she wanted to highlight them with capital letters so that the readers can understand the significance of those words in the lime light of her thoughts. She evolved her new way of technique of capitalization.

The next questionable aspect of Emily’s poems, is the non-titling of her poems. Very few of her poems have been given the titles, and remaining all are in majority known by the first line of her poems. T.H. Johnson provides a note as follows,
Emily Dickinson herself gave titles to twenty-four poems; twenty-one of the titles are for poems which she sent to friends, three are for poems in the packets. In every instance but two, among the twenty-one for poems sent to friends, the title is supplied in the letter accompanying the poem, not on the copy of the poem itself. The exceptions are no.s 15 and 227*.


It's really very amazing that a poet, who has to her credit nearly more than 1700 poems, has titles only for twenty-four. This puts many of the critics under the question, why didn't she title? Many of them consider that as Emily was not interested in publishing, she therefore did not feel to title her poems. What one needs to remember is that Emily had always done what she felt like, and perhaps she had no concern for names and titles. The evidence for this fact may be one of her poems,

You'll know it -- as you know 'tis Noon --
By Glory --
As you do the Sun --
By Glory --
As you will in Heaven --
Know God the Father -- and the Son.
By intuition, Mightiest things
Assert themselves – and not by terms –

“I’m Midnight” – need the Midnight say –

“I’m sunrise” – Need the Majesty?

Omnipotence – had not a Tongue –

His lisp – is Lightning – and the sun –

His conversation – with the sea –

“How shall you know”?

Consult your Eye!”

(You’ll know it – as you know ‘tis Noon)

This poem clearly depicts the fact that Emily never cared for names so she tells here that the mightiest things need not be known by their names, their glory, their power, their mightiness assert their presence in the world. And she gives higher attribution to ‘intuition’. She feels that it is intuition rather than language that makes us understand of the true power – let it be nature or God Himself. John Mulvihill observes that,

Dickinson rejected titling out of a Socratic, specifically Cratylian, distrust of names as knowledge The features are: (1) her use of quotation marks in poems to set off terms; (2) her odd way of referring to her own poems as if they were nonlinguistic things; and (3) the frequent avoidance of familiar names within poems. 

Mulvihill associates this feature of Emily’s to Socrates statement,
The knowledge of things is not to be derived from names...... no man of sense will like to put himself or the education of his mind in the power of names.”

Mulvihill also gives a series of lines from Dickinson’s poems, where she strongly rejects the value of names,

Of Mines, I little know – myself –
But just the names…..” (p.299)

I scarce esteem Location’s name-”- (p.725)

Their names, unless you know them,
Twere useless tell.” (p.1746)

Emily to a major extent rejects the traditional forms and seems to be interested in experimenting with metres, capitals, grammar, rhyme schemes and all sorts of punctuation. She went deep into the realms of language and captured her own technique which seems to be cryptic and unconventional by many. She intentionally went against the rules of grammar, perhaps to achieve unique significance to her poetry.

That such have died enable us
The tranquiller to die;
That such have lived,
Certificate for immortality.”
(That such have died enable us)
Keen observance of this poem shows that it is nothing but a single sentence broken into four lines and presented as a verse. But the skill of Emily lies in portraying her most recurring themes death and immortality in such a short poem.

Martha Hale Shackford defines Emily’s work in the following way,

Poetry to her was the expression of vital meanings, the transfer of passionate feeling and of deep conviction. Her work is essentially lyric; it lacks the slow, retreating harmonies of epic measures, it does not seek to present leisurely details of any sort; its purpose is to objectify the swiftly passing moments and to give them poignant expression. 12

Emily uses unusual words to describe some aspects. Though she picks up words from common life, she uses them to denote some extraordinary things. For example in the poem “Papa Above” she uses such an unusual imagery which strikes up every heart,

Papa above !
Regard a Mouse
O’erpowers by the Cat !
Reserve within thy kingdom
A “Mansion” for the Rat !
Snug in seraphic Cupboards
To nibble all the day,
While unsuspecting cycles
Wheel solemnly away!

(Papa Above)

She uses imagery very playfully here, though outwardly the poem seems to be a description of some playful thing, it actually pictures the mouse considering a cat as the angel of death and thinking of heaven as a snug cupboard where it could achieve eternity and the angel-mouse would nibble at cheese.

Regarding the technique of Emily, Graham Browne says,

Her genius lay in expressing the infinite in terms of close-by things, “her basket”, she said, “held firmaments.” “Extreme psychological states could be expressed if the right words were hunted down, yet a poem is not method. For those on friendly terms with cherubin, riffling through dictionaries is not always necessary.” Unusual word pairings which jolt the mind, are her trade mark confiscated Gods.” She made use of legal terms (she was born into a legal family) and scientific Ortheological vocabulary, “Enchantment’s Perihelion.¹³

Next feature of Emily’s poetry, worthy to be analyzed is the irregularity of rhyme scheme, she does not follow any proper rhyme scheme in her poetry. She follows a variety of rhyme schemes even in a small poem. She seems to be moved by the hymns she heard from childhood and employed them accordingly in her poems. She mainly seems to employ two things – assonance
and full rhyme. After a vivid reading of her poems, we can find out that she
generally uses assonance when she is uncertain and full rhyme shows her
certainty. The following poem shows her irregularity of rhyme scheme,

I never saw a moor,
I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks,
And what a wave must be.

I never spoke with God,
Nor visited in heaven;
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the chart were given."

(I Never Saw a Moor)

Generally Emily’s poems are considered to be monotonous, as many of
her poems are in octosyllabic quatrains or couplets, some have a full rhyme,
some others have assonance and some have none. But the monotony is actually
hidden by the depth and grandeur of poems and also the mood and the tone of
the poems. But when we consider the poems of Emily from her perspective and
analyze it carefully in the way she wanted, they would convey a lot about life –
its joys and problems. Once the poet’s identity is established along with her
poems, all the faults – technical, grammatical, punctuational etc will all be of
no concern. And these blemishes will be seen as that, which have been
committed deliberately to achieve her own form, her own technique, her own
significance.
T.W. Higginson had actually asked Emily not to publish her poems because of the fear, that they would not be accepted by the public because of their oddities. And so the first publishers even reconstructed her poems trying to avoid the unnecessary dashes, etc so that they would be accepted by the common public. In spite of all these irregularities, Emily achieved a significant position in the American literature and stands beside Walt Whitman.

Richard Pettinger points out,

But the inherent paradox and contradiction of Emily Dickinson makes for arresting poetry; with fluidity of language and metaphor she moves effortlessly between the holiest experience and the mundane pessimism of life's potential futility. 14

What actually enriches Emily's poems are abundant use of varied imagery, suitable metaphors, common words, strange and astonishing symbols. Her symbols mainly emerge from Nature which she considers as a divine will.

S.S. Chopra observes that,

"......it would be appropriate to state that with her extensive use of imagery, symbolism metaphors and other stylistic techniques with which she elevated her poems, Emily Dickinson stands out among those few American poets who analyzed death with such variety and intensity." 15
Emily uses large variety of vocabulary, very uncommon and sometimes self-invented. She uses, rather creates words like “omnifold”, “farness” and “foreignhood” to suit the context. She also uses very familiar words in strange phrases like; to address angels she calls “sapphire fellows”, she calls “purple territories” to mountains and the best of all perhaps is that she calls hell as “the Phosphorous of God”. These type of phrases mark a higher form of creativity of Emily. No one would imagine such type of symbolism, and the readers get awe-struck when they actually interpret them.

Dickinson limited herself to short poems with irregular rhyme scheme, improper metrical pattern but at the same time higher display of internal music of pause, sudden pauses by the use of dashes, alliteration, assonance, short and crisp lines and stanzaic pattern. She controlled her poetic force by constructing a triad of quatrains or double quatrains suitably developing it with a metaphor and ending the poem with a summarized statement or rather a question.

Martha Hale Shackford observes, “Lyric melody finds many forms in her work. Her repressed and austere verses, inexpansive as they are, have persistent appeal. Slow serene movement gives enduring beauty to these elegiac stanzas.”

“Let down the bars, O Death!
The tired flocks come in
Whose bleating ceases to repeat,
Whose wandering is done.”

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Emily's poetic originality can be mainly recognized by the world of spiritual forces around her. She accepted life as given to her and showed to the world how both joys and pleasures crept in her. And this gave her a unique style, full of amazing imagery, sharp and curt turns and association of humour with pure lyric poetry, so M.H. Shackford remarks,

Emily Dickinson's transcendental humour is one of the deep sources of her supremacy. Both in thought and in expression she gains her piercing quality, her undeniable spiritual thrust, by this gift, stimulating, mystifying but forever inspiring her readers to a profound conception of high destinies.
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