CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

This is my letter to the world
That never wrote to me, --
The simple news that Nature told,
With tender majesty.
Her message is committed
To hands I cannot see;
For love of her, sweet countrymen,
Judge tenderly of me!

("This is My Letter to the World")

Thus, sang a self-imposed socially secluded poetess of a small town, Amherst in Massachusetts which is 50 miles away from Boston. She was Emily Dickinson, a recluse, best known for her unique poetry.

Born in a highly conventional and puritanical family that had lived in New England for nearly seven generations, on 10th December, 1830, Dickinson had her schooling in Amherst Academy. Her father Edward Dickinson was the treasurer of Amherst College, a lawyer and a strong personality of the church. Then she was sent to Mount Holyoke Female seminary at South Hadley nearly ten miles from Amherst. There were mainly three groups of women in that seminary, one was the group of professed Christians, second was the group with ‘hope’ and the third was that without ‘hope’. Dickinson
belonged to the third group as her philosophy of religion and God, was purely unconventional free from all sorts of dogmas and orthodox principles. Though she was preoccupied with the concepts of God, death, immortality, soul etc, she could never give up herself to what her family and friends wanted, as she did not like the Calvinistic approach to religion which believed in the concept of "original sin". As T. Pettinger observes:

For Emily religious experience was not a simple intellectual statement of belief, it could be more accurately reflected in the beauty of nature, and the experiences of ecstatic joy. Yet, although her poetry expressed intense inner experiences, this separation from established religion is a factor in her uncertainties and fluctuations in sentiment, evident in many poems. ¹

After returning from Mount Holyoke, she spent all most all her days at Amherst except few visits to Washington, Boston and Philadelphia and she remained unmarried. Among her very few companions, Helen Hunt Jackson, an author, Benjamin F. Newton, an employee in her father’s law-office supported and identified her poetic genius. During one of her visits with her father, to Philadelphia, she met Charles Wadsworth, a married clergyman and it is believed that she had fallen in love with him. But however Wadsworth’s shifting to San Francisco is supposed to be the turning movement in her life when she actually got alienated from the society.
And this alienation of hers resulted in the accumulation of a bulk of her poetry. She was never interested in the publication of her poems, so, much of her poetry was published posthumously, only seven of her poems were published during her life time and even that too anonymously. She has written nearly 1700 poems besides many letters written to her friends and relatives. Emily Dickinson died at the age of 55 in the year 1886 from Bright’s disease, a problem related to kidneys. Her doctor identified that the constant stress throughout her life had resulted in her premature death.

Emily Dickinson did not write for “art for art’s sake” but rather for herself, her experiences, her thoughts and most of all the problems faced by people. So the most recurring themes in her poetry are pain, suffering, misery, death, immortality, God. She also wrote about nature but what is common in her poetry is that death and immortality always flashed in her poems. So John B. Pickard says:

Unlike most other American poets, she was religiously oriented. Even a cursory glance at her themes reveals an extreme preoccupation with the effect of death, the nature of the soul, the problems of immortality, the possibility of faith, and the reality of God. Certainly in the sense that she sought the essential moral truths veiled behind material appearances and strove to experience and perceive the Divine Force, she was mystically oriented. 2
Emily Dickinson dealt with extremities – may it be sorrow or pleasure. Some critics consider her to be an escapist because of her secluded life. Her isolation may be the result of continuous problems and struggles of life – "where but to be full of sorrow." But at the same time she struggled for her identity within herself. Her concept seemed to be unknown to the world but known to her soul. Seclusion was her will, and in this darkness of seclusion she groped for her soul:

I'm nobody! who are you?  
Are you nobody, too?  
Then there's a pair of us – don't tell!  
They'd banish us, you know.  

How dreary to be somebody!  
How public, like a frog  
To tell your name the livelong day  
To an admiring bog!

Religion was the dominant issue during 19th century. There was a clash between Calvinism and Transcendentalism, and this adversely affected Emily Dickinson. Though religious values moved Emily, she remained almost alien to the American Civil war which occurred during the period 1861-1865. She was not interested in the affairs of the day may be literary, social, political etc. On the other hand, her contemporary, Walt Whitman with whom she almost equaled was quite opposite to her. Walt Whitman was conscious of the fact as a
poet of his age but Dickinson did not even recognize her poetic qualities, her poetic abilities, so kept her poems almost unpublished. She would have never thought that her work would contribute to the bulk of American Literature in particular and English Literature in general. She was indeed unaware of her poetic genius, her poetic success:

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne’er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

(Success is counted sweetest).

Emily Dickinson was mainly influenced by the Metaphysical poets of 17th century England, the Bible and of course the religious situation prevailing in New England (Puritanism, Calvinistic approach etc) during her time. She even admired the poems of John Keats and also Robert and Elizabeth Barret Browning. But she lacked any intellectual companionship and she lived a life of hermit. She herself remarked, “I do not cross my father’s ground to any house or town.”

Emily Dickinson’s seclusion cannot be traced back to any one event and it was not a sudden one, it was gradual. But the lasting effect of this was she could not find any companions who would discuss the contemporary writers of that age, so she remained alien to many of the works during her age. America was undergoing a vast literary movement then with R.W.Emerson as the
central figure. Besides him, many works and their writers started to gain their powerful stand during that time. Nathaniel Hawthorne published “The Scarlet Letter” and “The House of the Seven Gables”; Herman Melville published his famous “Moby Dick”; Poe’s poems were published posthumously in 1850; Henry David Thoreau’s “Walden” and Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass” etc. appeared during her teenage and in her twenties. But that she had access to any of these was least known.

So Emily was unaware of the growing passion of literature in her own country, America. Unable to find anyone of her type she was easily attracted towards the mystical individualism of Emerson. But this individualism helped her to find new approaches to her thought and inner experiences through poetry.

I felt a cleaving in my mind
As if my brain had split,
I tried to match it, seam by seam,
But could not make them fit.

The thought behind I strove to join
Unto the thought before,
But sequence raveled out of reach
Like balls upon a floor.

(I Felt a Cleaving in My Mind)
Here, she herself describes her stature of mind where she was unable to gather up her thoughts and give them uniformity. As she was published posthumously, much of her life can be known through her poems and letters. For example her tender feelings towards Benjamin Newton, her tutor were recorded in one of her letters. She said, “Mr. Newton became to me a gentle, yet grave preceptor, teaching me what to read, what authors to admire, what was most grand or beautiful in nature, and that sublime lesson, a faith in things unseen, and in a life again, nobler and much more blessed.” But Newton’s death in 1853 left Emily with a lack of one of her worthy listeners and best tutors.

Emily Dickinson’s poetry is emotional and mainly deals with the inner life which is also a common factor seen among Romantics. So some critics observe that Emily’s poetry has Romantic element in it. She cannot be compared to the great pioneers of Romantic age-Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley but she had her own romantic insensibility. Henry W. Wells says,

The contrasted seeds of mysticism and stoicism took root in Emily’s mind not only because of her own personality, but through a congenial ground prepared for them by romantic sensibility.3

Though some romantic ideals are to be found in Emily’s poetry, one cannot say that she consciously imitated the romantic poets because she came across very few works of them. It is said that she was quite familiar with the
works of Byron but there is nothing symbolic in both of their poetry. Henry W. Wells remarks:

Singularly free from many of the qualities of her contemporaries or immediate predecessors, she has little specifically in common with the romantic poets, either of her own time of Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne and Arnold or the earlier period of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley. That she revolted from the Calvinistic training which she could never wholly forget, by no means makes her a follower of Byron, whose thought thus far, at least, followed hers. That she devoured Scott’s tales, in no way allied her creative mind to the acknowledged master of the early nineteenth century novel.

But what is seen common in Emily’s poems and those that of the Romanticists are the themes of nature, fantasy, childhood, beauty and most important of all celebration of the self. She combines the nature and self in her poems giving them a truly unique combination. In one of her poems, she is approached by the sea as a child and the way the sea welcomes her portrays the romantic element of her poetry.

I started early, Took my Dog,
And visited the sea;
The mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me –
And Frigates in the upper floor
Extended Hempen Hands,
Presuming me to be a Mouse
A ground, upon the sands.
(I started Early Took My Dog).

Dickinson’s poetry is actually a blend of Romanticism and Calvinism, if observed carefully. She tried to find pleasure through romantic qualities in a world of tragedies created by Calvinistic approach according to her. She seemed to try to get the mysteries of the universe solved through her poetry, by using her individual consciousness. Dickinson’s poems, if not all, but many have a rebellious attitude towards religion and God. Albert. J. Gelpi identifies affinity between Byron’s rebellious attitude and Emily’s. He remarks:

In both Byron and Dickinson, however, the mutiny was the Calvinist mind turning against itself and its Maker – a rebellion that is seldom whole-hearted, and hence, with an adversary within and one without a struggle that can hardly end in victory. 5

Thus one can observe that Emily Dickinson though not a Romantic in true sense, employed the romantic elements in her poetry unconsciously.

Most of the critics consider Emily Dickinson to be a modern poet in many forms. Though Emily belonged to the nineteenth century, her approach was almost modern; she maintained a modern temper through technical poetic innovations which almost no one in the nineteenth century had approached. Her
poems broke the norms of poetry of her time, so they were considered merely as the outbursts of a recluse rather than a poet. They were just like recorded entries of Emily’s contempt, disgust, and depression and sometimes of course pleasure which she found in very few things.

So, even her critics whom she gave her poems to gain criticism like T.W.Higginson, Samuel Bowles etc recommended her not to publish her poems not because they did not identify her as a poet but they considered that they would not be readily accepted because of the liberties Emily takes in writing her poems. She herself did not show any interest in their publication, as she herself remarked once, "How can you print a piece of your soul? Publication is the auction of the mind of man."

Some of the features of Dickinson’s poetry which unite her with the modern poetry are the usage of language of general or common speech but at the same time using an exact word instead of a decorative word, a clear poetry rather than vague and imperfect, and above all concentration. Her death poems abound with this concentration and also the exact expressions she uses to describe her mind, one such poem is as follows,

I died for beauty, but was scarce
Adjusted in the tomb,
When one who died for truth was lain
In an adjoining room.
He questioned softly why I failed?

“For beauty,” I replied

“And I for truth – the two are one;
We brethren are,” he said.

And so, as kinsmen met a night,
We talked between the rooms,
Until the moss had reached our lips,
And covered up our names.

(I Died for Beauty, but was Scarce)

She used similes and metaphors besides that she also presented some incidents or some things in a vivid, graphic form, which is once again one of the important features of modern poetry. One such example is her portrayal of a snake as

A narrow fellow in the grass
Occasionally rides;
You may have met him, - did you not?
His notice sudden is.

(A Narrow Fellow in the Grass)

Even in her technicalities, she resembled the modern poets as no one from nineteenth century employed the form she adopts especially new types of rhymes – eye rhymes (home-come); different rhymes (it-feet), identical rhymes (tomb-room) etc. And the most important of all, the detachment of the poet
from the poems, even in her autobiographical poems, she stands aloof from the persona of the poem displaying her characteristic detachment. So, though Emily did not really belong to the modern era, she displayed the characteristics of modern art in her poetry which makes her marked as a modern poet.

Emily Dickinson is often considered a visionary as she dealt with the intense emotions and situations of her life, soul as well as the world. She can be considered a “Visionary” artist in Jungian (of the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung and his theories) terms who makes a compensation of psychic imbalance through other possibilities. Some of the critics relate Dickinson to Shamanism, like Clifton Snider, who says,

Something in her psyche drove her to probe those “heights and depths”, which were often beyond her own fathoming. This something Jung calls an “innate drive”, and I believe that the archetype she chiefly represents and is driven by is Shamanism. (Shaman: a witch doctor or a priest claiming to communicate with Gods) ⁶

Snider tells that Emily Dickinson does not actually relate to Shamanism but rather to the description of neo-shamans which was given by Joan. B. Townsend, Joan regarded neo-shamans as people “often disenchanted with traditional religions and often with much of Western society. Although they tend not to be affiliated with any organized religion, they all continue intensive personal quests for spirituality, meaning and transcendence.”
Dickinson is mainly grouped under the shamans because of her investigating approach into the mysteries of the world, which are by and large the concern of shamans. Death, immortality, life after death, pain, depression, cure and loss are the mysteries which the shamans generally probe into and even Emily Dickinson has a bulk of poetry to her credit on these themes. Another fact which drives Dickinson to Shamanic belief is her conviction that lyric poetry "reveals the essence of things."

Obviously it was religion which disturbed Dickinson’s thoughts, she could not accept the orthodox beliefs of divine sin, being chosen, the act of redemption, but at the same time she could not reject the crux of almost every religion – death and immortality. Many of her poems strongly show her faith in immortality and she herself calls it a ‘Flood Subject’, these themes occur not only in her poems but even letters. Thus immortality is one of the major issues of Shamanism. She says:

Some things that stay there be –
Grief – Hills – Eternity –
Nor this behooveth me.
(Some Things That Fly There be-)

Death and immortality were central to her thought. She saw many deaths in her surroundings. She records her experience of one of the funeral ceremonies she had attended during her childhood, "When a few years old-I was taken to a funeral which I now know was of peculiar distress, and the
clergyman asked, “Is the Arm of the lord shortened, that it cannot save?” I mistook the accent for a doubt of Immortality and not daring to ask, it besets me still, though we know that the mind of the Heart must live if its clerical parts do not. Would you explain it to me?” she wrote this in one of her letters to Higginson.

So it can be observed that Emily Dickinson’s mind was preoccupied with these concepts right from her childhood. Another important fact that binds Emily with Shamanism is her dressing up in white colour which is considered as a part of her seclusion. She considered wearing white equal to gaining victory over the trails and tribulations of life. A group of shamans associated with Buryat culture wear white. These white shamans wear white fur. In one of her poems, she expresses her feelings towards dressing in white,

Take your Heaven further on –
This – to Heaven divine Has gone –
Had you earlier blundered in
Possibly, e’en you had seen
An Eternity – put on –
Now – to ring a Door beyond
Is the utmost of your Hand –
To the skies – apologizes –
Nearer to your courtesies
Than this sufferer polite –
Dressed to meet you –
Shamans believe the world to be configured in mainly three cosmic zones, they are underworld, earth and sky and these are all connected by the Cosmic Mountain. In this sense, Clifton Snider says,

Now Dickinson a neo-shaman, never actually reaches the other side of the mountain. A little like Moses on Pisgah, she reaches the summit occasionally and has tentative glimpses of the afterlife. Death, she says in “Of Death I try to think like this-” (1558), is something positive that must be seized by the bold. 7

So it can be to some extent considered that Emily Dickinson had a shamanistic view of things. Some critics point out that if she had lived during the age of shamanism, she would be truly identified as a shamanistic poet. Not only a neo-shaman but also like a traditional shaman she believes and hopes to see God and live, after great pain (death).

Emily Dickinson is also viewed as a feminist poet and her poetry depicts that fact,

I’m “wife” – I’ve finished that –
That other state –
I’m czar – I’m “Woman” now –
It’s safer so-
(I’m “Wife” – I’ve Finished That)

See – in white!
(Take Your Heaven Further On)
It is known through her letters that her father bought her new books but asked her not to read as he feared that they would have an adverse effect on her mind. Mina Surjit Singh remarks about the attitude of Emily:

Contrary to her portrait as painfully wounded and obsessed with deprivation, Dickinson was a woman whose personal dimensions could be very keenly felt in her household. Self-willed and very much in possession of herself, she was not to be easily subdued by an authoritative patriarch who was accustomed to issuing instructions and meeting with unquestioned compliance. Edward Dickinson gradually began to make several concessions; the most significant of which was allowing Emily to keep her own hours of writing.

This indicates that though Emily appears to be an introvert and sometimes suppressive and oppressed through her poems, she actually asserted great power at home and her rebellious attitude is evident through her poems.

Besides these touches of Romanticism, Modern Poetry and Feminism, what is prominent in Dickinson's poetry is the presence of mystical elements, so strongly rooted that she is often considered a mystical poet. Mysticism is the study of deep and obsessive problems of life i.e. death, soul, immortality, God, heaven, salvation etc, it is also the ability of a person to develop a spiritual contact with God. In her attempt to uncover the mysteries of life and death, belief and doubt, hope and despair hiding behind the material
appearances of the world and trying to understand the divine force, she pictures herself to be a mystic, a mystic by thought not in reality.

The most recurring and used themes of Dickinson relate to mysticism in one way or the other. Death and immortality are seen almost everywhere in her poems. Although her poems express doubt over religion, she accepts God as the ultimate soul; the ultimate power towards which she can turn whenever she wills. Though she could not "convert" herself to the then belief of "the saved", she practiced her own form of religious belief. Her poetic genius can't be measured in the general sense. T. W. Ford remarks:

Emily Dickinson's existential awareness of the reality and the "problem" of death had a pervasive influence on the content of the poems she wrote and, indeed, was the principal reason for her turning her energies to poetic composition of any kind.
REFERENCES

1. T.Pettinger – “Short Biography Emily Dickinson”


4. Ibid


6. Clifton Snider , “A Druidic Difference”: Emily Dickinson and Shamanism
   www.csulb.edu/~csnider/dickinson.shamanism.html.

7. Ibid


9. Thomas.W.Ford ,“The Role of Death in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry”