CHAPTER – II

EMILY DICKINSON AS A MYSTIC POET

Emily Dickinson is mainly known as a mystic poet because of the macabre poems she had written. Mysticism is considered to be the vital part of the Christian heritage and the core of Christian spirituality. But Christianity had little to do with Emily because in 19th century Calvinism prevailed, that is the concept of “original sin” was given importance. Dickinson could not accept this view; she had her own ways of being religious, which are evident from her poetry.

The poem “Just so Jesus Raps” presents her religious bent of mind. She is not an atheist who doesn’t believe in the existence of God, nor is she a skeptic who doubts His existence. In fact she says in this poem that Jesus is the last person who knocks at the door of any person.

Just so – Jesus – raps –
He – doesn’t weary –
Last – at the knocker –
And first – at the Bell.
(Just so – Jesus – raps)

She tells through this poem that once the soul mingles in Jesus and God, earthly existence does not matter at all.
She even accepts the orthodox view of Christianity that is the Last Judgement. She feels that every individual needs to be “patient” until the resurrected body rejoins the soul, awaiting its individual judgement.

It will be ample time for – me –

Patient – upon the steps – until then –

Heart! I am knocking – low at thee.

(It will be ample time for – me –)

Though she accepted some of the vital concepts of religion, she did even reject the base of Christianity that is the Bible. In one of her poems, she criticizes the Bible as an anachronous and impractical volume which was written not by inspired prophets but by men who have become feeble by the passing of time.

The Bible is an antique volume –

Written by faded Men”

She feels that the Bible was not a result of any divine inspiration but it was just advocated by weak ghosts.

At the suggestion of Holy specters –

Another interesting point to be noted in this poem is, her sympathy towards the greatest enemy of humanity, Satan and Judas, the traitor who betrayed Christ.
Satan – the Brigadier –
Judas – the great Defrauder-

She must have sympathized with them as she herself rejected some of the vital views of her religion. She did not like to chain up herself in the string of orthodox views. She felt that every human being should have that liberty to select his or her own views. So also Satan rebelled against the law which he did not like. And moreover it was foretold that crucifixion was evident, so one need not be too cruel towards these rebels.

Emily Dickinson’s poems have an effect of making the readers move towards her feelings as they make emotions such as love, hope, death and immortality, loneliness so closer to them. She is a poet in whom the mystic qualities are deep-rooted. In one of the reviews David R. Williams, in “This consciousness. That is Aware: Emily Dickinson in the wilderness of the Mind”, says,

Having recently read a number of her biographies, I was stuck by the different impression one gets from that of reading her poems themselves. If readers come to Emily Dickinson’s poems with an open mind, I believe that they will find her to be a mystic in the tradition of Plato, Rumi, Emerson and Blake.

Plato speaks of the search of the wisdom in his Phaedo as dying to the outer life and attaining inner union with the One. Emily Dickinson’s poems are known more for giving importance to the inner spiritual existence. She
expresses her desire to enter the inner life which could be possible only after
one’s death. In her poem “I Heard a Fly Buzz when I did” she says how
anxious she was to rescue herself from the manacles of the physical world and
enter the bliss of the spiritual world. But even at this moment she has to face an
interruption because of a fly, a very small and insignificant being. She says that
fly intervenes between the light and her, bringing her back to darkness.

I willed my keepsakes, signed away
What portion of me be Could make assignable, -
and then There interposed a fly-

As compared to Rumi, they both share a sort of same feelings which is
evident from the following lines of the poems of Emily and Rumi respectively,

Much Madness is divinest Sense—
To a Discerning Eye—
Much Sense – the starkest Madness.”
(Emily Dickinson)
The secret of madness is the supreme strength of the mind.
Go mad with love, if sanity is what you want to find.
(Rumi)

True mysticism does not just focus on mystical experiences which come
and go, it mainly focuses on the ever-lasting experience of God, leading to the
union with God. In one of her poems, Emily says,
The soul selects her own society,
Then -shuts the door- "

These lines can be interpreted in two ways. One is, the soul may refer to a physical body which has its own choice of selecting a society, where it wants to live. As soon as it finds a comfortable and suitable place it would shut the door, not to allow any other set of doctrines in its life. On the other hand, soul indicates the inner being of an individual which selects its own society and that society which a soul yearns for is nothing but the society of God that is union with God.

The main reason for Emily to be dragged towards mysticism is her seclusion. And this seclusion was mainly because of the disturbance in her inner life. And it is because of this disturbance and seclusion, that her poetry has death, suffering, pain etc as their prominent themes. And of all, death haunted her all the time,

Dust is the only secret
Death the only one
You cannot find out all about
In "his native town.
(Dust is the only Secret)

We can also have a look of Emily's theology in her poem "I heard a Fly Buzz When I died". She presents her yearning to have a look at the creator, the God
For that last onset, when the king
Be witnessed in his power

It clearly shows that the person (rather the poet) about to embrace death is all so anxious to look at the God which could be possible only after one's death.

Her optimistic attitude towards life can be seen in her poem "I taste a Liquor Never Brewed". This poem gives a clear identity of the poet and her spiritual approach, which in turn proves her mystic quality. Here she says that through the image of liquor that she has drunk all the joys of her life. When we actually have a look at her real life we can hardly witness any joys, but here the poetess seems to be very optimistic as she says indirectly that she enjoys her life. Tasting the liquor is nothing but tasting the joys in her life,

I taste a liquor never brewed,
From Tankards scooped in pearl

And in this process of tasting the joys, she is so intoxicated that seeing her even the nature joins her. And she wants to drink more to continue this state of ecstasy,

When butterflies renounce their drams
I shall but drink the more!

Emily Dickinson has that quality of playing with words. She uses different words to address God, especially in her poem, "I Never Lost as Much
But Twice.” She says she is a beggar who stands at the door of God again and again. Though she doesn’t tell clearly what she has actually lost, she portrays a feeling that something very valuable has been lost two times and she stands again before him for the third time,

    I never lost as much but twice,
    And that was in the sod.
    Twice have I stood a beggar
    Before the door of God !”

Her belief in God is exposed here when she tells that both the times, God through his angels repaid her loss. When she uses the word ‘reimbursed’ – she thinks that God himself was responsible for the loss. She uses three different words to address God – ‘Burglar ! Banker – Father!’” which have no connection with one another.

    Angels – Twice descending
    Reimbursed my store –
    Burglar ! Banker - - Father !
    I am poor once more!

She calls God – a Burglar to indicate that he steals human possessions or indirectly inflicts losses upon them. By using this word one may consider Emily as an atheist or an ardent disbeliever but the next word used to address God that is Banker clears misunderstanding. She feels God as a Banker who recompensates for the losses. And the third word – Father, is used traditionally
to indicate care, affinity and protection. It is after all God to whom we turn towards in times of need.

In one of her letters, she seems to equal herself to Eve who was tempted by Satan, She says,

I think of the perfect happiness I experienced while I felt I was an heir of heaven as of a delightful dream, out of which the Evil one bid me wake and again return to the world and its pleasures. Would that I had not listened to his winning words!....... I determined to devote my whole life to [God’s] service and desired that all might taste of the stream of living water from which I cooled my thirst. But the world allured me and in an unguarded moment I listened to her siren voice.¹

(L, I, 30)

Comparing the world to Siren, she gives up herself to the worldly pleasures rather than to divinely pleasures. She herself accepts her lack in true faith in God and her attachment to earthly things.

In response to the lines in this letter (L, I, 30; quoted above), Margaret Homans says,

The modern reader prefers to think that she saw the religious fervor of her day as a delusion, and in retrospect it is easy to doubt that she would ever have considered entrusting her mental faculties to the keeping of her saviour. But a parodic element is coextensive with whatever sincere religious sorrow she expresses; and to mean two
opposing things at the same time would very likely debase the writer's faith in the possibility of a literal truth, whether secular or Christian.²

The poem, “Because I could not Stop for Death” also has a mystic touch. It, no doubt talks about death and immortality but according to Allen Tate, it also has a Christian theme.

The terror of death is objectified through this figure of the genteel driver, who is made ironically to serve the end of Immortality. This is the heart of the poem: she has presented a typical Christian theme in its final irresolution, without making any final statements about it.³

Though Emily in this poem does not directly tell us what her mind and heart say, but she has that logic in her, which makes the readers ponder over what she has written.

Because I could not stop for death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And immortality
We slowly drove, he knew no haste,
And I had put away
My labor, and leisure too,
For his civility.”

(Because I Could not Stop for Death)
As referred earlier Emily did not totally condemn religion and God nor did she totally accept their orthodox values. She had her own ways of depicting her religious attitude. She did not like the conventional form of worshipping by going to churches. She felt that it is not just through religious dogmas that one can concentrate on God but even by sitting at home one can truly pray God. One such poem of Emily which directly attacks these orthodox views is “Some keep the Sabbath going to church”.

In this poem she tells how, for some people religion and God are limited, for only Sundays. And they practice Sabbath just as a custom or rule but not whole-heartedly or with true divine intention. She stresses it two times showing her strong agitation towards these hypocrites who just show off to be religious but actually they aren’t.

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church;
I keep it staying at Home,
With a Bobolink for a chorister,
And an Orchard for a Dome.”

(Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church)

In the second stanza also she satirizes the orthodox people, who dress up to show their religious nature but Emily does not like to do so, so she says,

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice;
I just wear my wings,
And instead of tolling the bell, for church,
Our little sexton sings.”
She addresses God as a ‘noted clergyman’ who preaches sermons. She tells that instead of going to Heaven to look at or meet this preacher, she would better adopt her own way where she could take the help of nature,

God preaches, a noted clergyman –
And the sermon is never long;
So instead of getting to heaven, at last,
I'm going, all along!

This unorthodox belief of Emily in God, makes Norman Foester remark that:

She had faith and skepticism, reverence and irreverence, sober directness and elfish indirectness. Highly typical is her trick of aggrandizing the small, or more often, of diminishing the large – as when she makes God ‘a noted clergyman’ or “Papa above”. Her childlike simplicity is only apparent.

The confusion in the mind of Emily Dickinson was mainly because of the conflicts between Puritanism and Modernism she witnessed during her time. Though she attended the sermons to some extent, she could not fully accept them. She saw many of her friends and others including her family members accepting the dogmatic view of Christianity of the ‘original sin’ and portraying themselves as the ‘saved’ ones. As a result she could not be one with them, thus resulting in her solitude and desolation. Keeping this in mind, Sumangali Morhall remarks,
Emily would not commit to something she could not sincerely feel, even under the unthinkable social pressure that surrounded her.⁵

And this seclusion of hers resulted in the form of a poetry where sometimes she feels inclined to religion and sometimes she stands aloof from all these and observes like a spectator.

Emily was more interested in writing the poems of what her soul feels. She was least concerned about the people around her. But we can also observe that her introvert nature basically sprung from her surroundings and the people around her. She gave new definitions to her emotions including mainly the religious ones. Though her poems seem to be universal they had a personal touch. She gave much importance to ‘eternity’. This shows her mystical approach to life. Graham Brown remarks.

Much present in the poetry of Dickinson is the idea of the proximity of the Eternal in the here and now. Like other visionaries she was not content to await Judgement Day for a glimpse of paradise but, like William Blake, knew that it was visible if the doors of perception could be cleansed.⁶

For Emily, salvation would rather mean union with the self, the soul rather than God. Though she has utmost faith in God, she prefers her soul more. She feels that a human mind is so powerful and limitless that even the sky looks small before it. The mind has the power to overtake anything in the world. And this power can be got when a human realizes his soul or his own
self. The knowledge of the self is more important than anything in the world. This realization of self makes human thinking limitless. This idea she presents in one of her poems,

The Brain-is wider than the sky –
For put them side by side –
The once the other will contain with ease –
and you – beside -

Graham Brown compares this poem to Muso Soseki’s Zen Buddhist perspective.

For a person of Zen*
No limits
The blue sky must
feel ashamed to be so small.”

(*Zen : form of Buddhism emphasizing meditation and intuition)

Further elaborating this view, he says, “The sense of paradox so fundamental to Zen is also ever present in Dickinson. The similarities to Dickinson’s insights despite the fact that she had direct access to Eastern wisdom are a testimony to the University of the Experience of self realization.

Sumangali Morhall remarks:

Until the age of 30 she continued going to church, although she was excluded from certain meetings and services open only to those who had been ‘saved’. She became increasingly reclusive throughout her
30’s. It is tempting to see her seclusion as further evidence of spiritual asceticism. Her spiritual path was certainly intensely lonely in such a social climate, but she craved alones more and more, and seclusion somehow formed a symbiotic relationship with her art. Increasingly her art became an expression of her spirituality.\(^7\)

During her period, as told, earlier people were fast running towards Calvinism, and even Emily changed her track not to Calvinism but rather towards Transcendentalism. Graham Brown identifies the growth of Transcendentalism as,

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\text{........... a philosophic and literary movement that flourished in New England as a reaction against 18}^{th}\text{ century rationalism, the skeptical philosophy of Locke and the confining religious orthodoxy of New England Calvinism.}^{8}
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Emily’s love of nature also led her towards mystical bent of mind. Unable to bear the seclusion she spent her time pondering over nature, she wrote poems to distract her mind from the worldly problems she faced. She felt poetry was the best means to pour down her feelings which she could never share with anyone. In doing so, Emily though not personally but yet is sharing her entire life through these poems with the entire humanity. T. Pettinger remarks:

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\text{Despite Emily’s seclusion and frail health, her poetry reveals that she did experience moments of great joy. Through nature and life she was}
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able to glimpse into a mystic dimension beyond worldly distractions; although it is also clear this did not become a permanent feeling.  

Emily has so many poems to her credit, but it is not that she limited herself to any one theme. But her major themes that are death, immortality, God, religion peeped through many of her poems either directly or indirectly. It is hard to identify or limit Emily to any one extreme. Her poems are rather continuous and interlinked with each other. Her poems seem to penetrate deep into each and every string of human life depicting two sides of a coin (i.e. life). Martha Hale Shackford remarks:

Without elaborate philosophy, yet with irresistible ways of expression, Emily Dickinson's poems have true lyrical appeal, because they make abstractions such as love, hope, loneliness, death, and immortality, seem near and intimate and faithful. She looked at existence with a vision so exalted and secure that the reader is long dominated by that very excess of spiritual conviction.  

Talking about Emily's attitude towards God, one can observe that, it was not God she mocked at or shunned at, but it was the concept of puritan God, that she rejected. She did not want to accept Him as the one, puritans portray, but rather she had her own attitude towards God. The level of irreverence she maintains towards God sometimes confuses and astonishes the readers. One such example is –
The Maker’s cordial visage,
However good to see,
Is shunned we must admit it,
Like an adversity.

She calls God as a “burglar, banker, father” which indicates that she treated Him as something human rather than divine. But on the other hand she writes in a letter to Abiah Root (L9) in September 1846,

I feel I have not yet made my peace with God. I am still a stranger to the delightful emotions which fill your heart. I have perfect confidence in God and his promise and yet I know not why, I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections. I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, were I called to die. Pray for me dear that I may yet enter into the kingdom of heaven, that there may be room left for me in the shining courts above. ¹¹

This letter shows the fears and doubts of Emily of what God would do with her, find a room in heaven or push her to hell. It shows the desire of Emily to join other pious lot in the final abode i.e. Heaven. It depicts her longing to find a place in Paradise. Besides all these, the major fact is that Emily was conscious of her own self as irreligious to some extent and it is that fear that is portrayed in this letter.

In her poem “Behind Me-Dips Eternity” she talks about eternity and immortality standing behind and before her. And she considers death as the one
which would lead her to immortality. It is in this poem where she seems to make a notion of Christian trinity,

"Tis kingdoms – afterward – they say –
In perfect – pauseless Monarchy –
whose prince – is son of None –
Himself – His Dateless Dynasty –
Himself – Himself diversity –
In Duplicate divine.

In this stanza of 6 lines she presents two different thoughts – firstly by using the term ‘Himself’ 3 times she indirectly hints at the concept of trinity in Christianity. But at the same time she says “son of none-Himself” which is against Christian mythology because it believes Jesus, as son of God. Here Emily’s ideas seem to be clearer that is she considers Jesus none other than God Himself. God has recreated himself in the form of Jesus and so she again says “In Duplicate divine.” Thus Emily considers Jesus as a duplicate of God, to whom the endless, timeless Dynasty belongs.

Perhaps it is because of all these complexities in the thoughts of Emily that M.H. Shackford considers Emily Dickinson as,

A poet in the deeper mystic qualities of feeling rather than in the external merit of precise rhymes and flawless art, Emily Dickinson’s place is among those whose gifts are too intrinsic for renown.¹²
REFERENCES

1. Margaret Homans. *Emily Dickinson and Poetic Identity*

2. Ibid.


