CHAPTER – III

DEATH AND IMMORTALITY IN DICKINSON’S POETRY

Sylvia Plath in her famous poem, “Lady Lazarus” says, “Dying is an art, like everything else.”

Similarly, this aspect of life that is death which is the end of life seems to attract Emily Dickinson very much. So also, death is the most frequently used themes in her poems. Her attachment to death and immortality which are the recurring themes in her poetry are once again because of her mental isolation from the physical and material world, her non-orthodox views of religion and at the same time her belief in religion. She herself admits the conscious role of death in her life, in her letter to Higginson, “Death gave me awe for friends, striking sharp and early, for I held them since in a brittle love, of more alarum than peace.

“Death”, haunted Emily Dickinson everywhere, it was the crucial problem which she always tried to overcome. Death prevailed all around her, though a natural phenomenon which is seen in everyone’s life; it got a special attraction from Emily. She studied death in every conceivable way; she could not easily forget any death or funeral she overcame in her life. In one of her letters to Mrs. J.G. Holland, she refers to the death of her neighbour saying,
“A woman died last week, young and in hope
but a little while – at the end of our garden.”

Her poem “Because I could not stop for Death,” gives a clear cut view of how Emily Dickinson regarded death. What we mainly see in her poems is not the fear, anguish, tension and trauma that death brings in her mind but it is the solace and her anxiety to accept death in order to end up this gruesome life and enter the state of immortality where you need not worry about the physical world. In short she accepts death as a concrete fact and a sensible truth which is inevitable and should always be welcomed.

In a letter to her friend Abiah Root, in 1846, on the occasion of the death of Sophia Holland, and its impression on her she gives her clear and vivid description of her thought of death:

Does not Eternity appear dreadful to you. I often get thinking of it and it seems so dark to me that I almost wish there was no Eternity. To think that we must forever live and never cease to be. It seems as if Death which all so dread because it launches us upon an unknown world be a relief to so endless a state of existence. I don’t known why it is, but it does not seem to me that I shall ever cease to live on earth – I cannot imagine with the farthest stretch of my imagination my own death-scene-It does not seem to me-that I shall ever close my eyes in death.
In her poem, "I Heard a Fly buzz when I died," she makes an attempt to bring in the two most repeated themes that is death and immortality together. It tries to portray the feelings of a mortal person awaiting death to reach the point of immortality. It pathetically and at the same time anxiously presents the atmosphere of death in and around the physical and mental state of the victim.

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 Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died")

She, here, hopes to rescue herself from the never ending and sadistic torture of her life by escaping through death. Here Emily Dickinson can be compared to one of the pillars of Romantic age, John Keats, who tries to escape the physical problems of the world by attaining death, his ode, "Ode to a Nightingale" represents Keats love towards death,

Darkling I listen, and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath.

Her idea of death was that, it was just a small interval after a short life of mortality to enter a never ending life of immortality. In fact Death which is
actually the end of life is given a position of the beginner of life of immortality by Emily in one of her poems,

A Death-blow is a Life – blow to some
Who, till they died, did not alive become;
Who had they lived, had died but when
They died, vitality begun.

Through this very short poem of four lines, Emily conveys a vivid picture of death. This mortal life involves nothing but stress, strain and continuous flow of activity which can be stopped only with the help of the arrival of death. Death, gives time and leisure to renew one’s energy, vigor and vitality to step into the everlasting life of immortality.

Dickinson’s biographers, Whicher, Johnson and Chase and some critics like Thomas Wellborn Ford have grouped Emily Dickinson’s poems as follows:-

(i) poems dealing with death and immortality
(ii) poems dealing with the physical aspects of death
(iii) poems which personify death; and
(iv) poems with an elegiac note

Looking at the various themes covered by Emily Dickinson and the doubt, despair and at the same time the belief, hope she displays in her poems Thomos. W.Ford says,
In her poems of death and immortality and in her elegies she gives her ideas free play. They are not consistent. She expresses hope for immortality, then doubt. She pictures this life as merely a test for the next, then as all. She praises God, then condemns Him. She sees man as divine, then as lowly.¹

Emily Dickinson 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 does not only speak about death but also the pain a person experiences few moments before his death, then how he becomes still and motionless and at last how slowly the soul departs the physical body.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –

The nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs;

Here, she excellently portrays the true 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 sense till the moment, death seizes away his soul.

As freezing persons recollect the snow –

First chill, - then stupor – then the letting go.

She was so obsessed with death, that she even attributes a season for death. In her poem, “The Saddest Noise, The Sweetest Noise,” she says that the spring season which is loved by everyone is full of sad, sweet and mad musical notes. It is the season where the living people remember the dead,
It makes us think of all the dead
That sauntered with us here,
By separation's sorcery
Made cruelly more dear.

Death in her poetry is portrayed through some common things and materials. As T.W.Ford says in his "The Role of Death in Emily Dickinson's poetry,"

Death as an awesome force in the universe, thoughts not subject to the test of observation and experience she views existentially through the concrete and homely images of the house; freckled pane, cobweb, buzzing fly, indolent housewife, sweeping, early task, bustle in the house, spools of thread, busy needles, stirring house.

Though her poems sometimes present her escaping attitude from the problems of life, she still seems to be hopeful, which can be seen in her poem, "I taste a liquor never brewed." This poem presents the will of being immortal, as she enjoys her life by drinking the pleasures present in it. She seems to be fully satisfied by her life in the poem and she wants to continue it further,

".................................
I shall but drink the more!
Till seraphs swing their snowy Hats,
And saints to windows run,
To see the little Tippler
Leaning against the Sun!"
Emily Dickinson’s poems sometimes have death or sometimes immortality as their themes. But there are some poems which are a blend of death and immortality. She combines these two themes and as a result very thought provoking and heart touching poems have been brought up by her. The best example of the mixture of these two themes is the poem, “Because I could not stop for Death.” It is supposed to be the most famous, the most acclaimed and the most talked about poem of all her poems. It is also one of her most technically perfect poems.

Death and immortality here are personified as two people who lead the poet to her ultimate home. The stock opening of the poem itself indicates a sought of suspense, fear and tension.

Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;

Analysing this poem, S.S.Chopra in his paper, “Some stylistic Applications in Emily Dickinson’s ‘Because I could not stop for Death,” says

Suffering is an integral part of Dickinson’s poetry – it is central to unfulfilled love, to death and immortality. Over half her poems are suggestive of the fact that she was death – haunted. “Death”, which seems to be her principal subject, shadows nearly all her poems.” 3
She gives her ideas about the horror and terror when one sees one’s grave. She describes grave as a “House” and it is as if the ground has a swelling.

We paused before a House that seemed

A Swelling of the Ground;

The Roof was scarcely visible,

The cornice but a Mound.

The way she has presented in these lines makes Pickard remark that,
Here the terror is achieved without any morbid description of moldering bones and worms so frequently used by Poe. The tenuous bond between life and death is ‘scarcely visible’ as the poet finally perceives her destination.”

The most remarkable aspect in this poem, is her companion ‘immortality’ presented by death. Death leads her to immortality relieving her forever from the pain and suffering caused by mortality. Her mind is so preoccupied with her companion and so she doesn’t even care to know where they are going.

Literally this poem may just indicate a journey of a person to his / her final abode (i.e., grave). But if analyzed carefully it may also conotate the journey of an individual to a spiritual world, where you reach your destination through rest i.e.. meditation.
The last stanza truly depicts the desire of the speaker; it is not 'death' that she yearns for but 'immortality'.

Since then - ’tis centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horse’s heads
Were toward Eternity.”

So here Dickinson considers “death” as a way that leads towards eternity or immortality. But yet there seems to be some indefiniteness in the last two lines when she says she “first surmised” – that is she is not sure whether death actually leads her towards eternity or not. Her fears follow her even to her grave.

Another poem of Emily Dickinson, which gives a vivid description on the subject of immortality is “Behind Me-Dips Eternity” - It is one of the most identified poems of Emily on the subject of immortality. Here she says,

Behind Me – dips Eternity –
Before Me – Immortality –
Myself – the Term between –
Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,
Dissolving into Dawn away,
Before the West begin -”

Here she depicts the situation just before one’s death. She feels she is standing on the verge of her life where Eternity and Immortality lie on the back
and front of her. She tries to move towards the Eastern side which is rather dull as indicated by the use of colour ‘gray’, but very soon even this light dissolves into dawn. Then she thinks of the west. She uses the images of East and West to indicate her life (i.e., East) and her afterlife (i.e., west). She hasn’t tasted eternity or immortality yet so she tells “Before the west begin-”

The second stanza seems to be broken away from this concept as she suddenly starts talking about divinity. But the third stanza again is a continuation of the theme as that of the first.

In the third stanza, she treats immortality as miraculous which cannot be easily interpreted through reasoning. The imagery she uses here is superb,

Tis Miracle before Me – then –
Tis Miracle behind – between –
A crescent in the Sea –
With Midnight to the North of Her –
And Midnight to the South of Her –
And Maelstrom – in the sky –

She imagines herself to be ‘a crescent’ which has risen in the sky after experiencing the darkness (midnight) of her life throughout. And what she sees all around her is a miracle (immortality). She is like a new moon which is on the threshold of the kingdom of ‘Immortality’. She feels liberated from the darkness of her life, and at last she feels the spell of gloomy midnight would ultimately breakup. And as a result of this there is utter chaos in the sky.
Identifying “immortality” as the backbone of Emily’s poetry, Sumangali Morhall says,

Immortality ("the Flood Subject" as she called it) consumed Emily’s consciousness. Dwelling on death was natural in those times as illness and general hardship frequently took lives around her, her awareness heightened further by the many years spent in a house adjoining a cemetery. But dwelling on death was also almost a spiritual practice, a ‘graveyard meditation; a means of focus, breathing life into the concepts of ternity, Infinity and Immortality.⁵

Emily’s insight into the portrait of death can be considered as one of the major contributions to American literature. She gives her readers a list of images of death which one could never imagine about. She not only tells how a person about to die feels but also covers various other things like the feelings of a person before, during and after death, feelings of the people on someone’s death, the funeral rites etc. But what is seen after reading many of her poems is that her dilemma over immortality, in one poem (“I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died”) she is doubtful whether a dead person can truly attain immortality, whereas in another poem “Behind Me-dips Eternity”, she is confident of the fact that immortality surely exists after death. The two concepts death and immortality were almost brought to life by Emily through her poetry.

Emily’s interest in death must have forced her to write poetry which vastly deals with death. It can be to some extent accepted that she wrote poetry
as she was preoccupied by death, its miseries and fear during life and pleasure after life (immortality) so Thomas W. Ford says,

Emily Dickinson was ever conscious of “Death’s tremendous nearness”. The sound of death was rarely beyond hearing distance. Though she never resolved her conflicts, in a sense she triumphed over death by transmuting the uncertainties of her experience into the art of her poetry.6

Emily is of the opinion that human beings should not try to escape from death but rather welcome it with open hands. She regards death as that source which would liberate the human soul from the limitless atrocities in life caused by people, diseases, natural calamities etc. She narrates this in the form of the following poem,

The clouds their backs together laid
The north began to push,
The forests galloped till they fell,
The lighting skipped like mice;
The thunder crumbled like a stuff —
How good to be safe in tombs,
Where nature’s temper cannot reach,
Nor vengeance ever comes.”
(The clouds their backs together laid)
One can observe in this poem the profound want and desire of death that Emily craved for. She reaches her height of love towards death and grave when she says that a tomb is a safe place, which prevents human mind from the distractions and horrors created by nature. But in contrast to this poem, there is one more poem which talks of death relating to nature very differently. The poem is

Safe in their Alabastar Chambers –
Untouched by Morning
And untouched by Noon –
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection –
Rafter of Satin,
And Roof of stone.
Light laughs the breeze
In her Castle above them –
Bobbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,
Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence –
Ah, what sagacity perished here !

(Safe in their Alabastar Chambers –)

In this poem she talks about nature with a different perspective. According to her death leads men no doubt to a safer place which is covered by satin which gives the appearance of snow but at the same time prevents him from enjoying the silent pleasures of nature. Here death is rather dealt in ironic terms as the poet seems to praise grave as spacious, covered by satin etc but actually she hints on saying that though beautiful, grave is useless as it is a
place just for lifeless beings and also a place which shuts down the beauties of
the outer world.

She shares this same view in another poem, which she even titled a
"Country Burial,"

Ample make this bed –
Make this bed with awe –
In it wait till Judgement break
Excellent and fair
Be its mattress straight –
Be its pillow round –
Let no sunrise’s yellow noise –
Interrupt this ground.

(Country Burial)

She would have named it as ‘Country Burial’ as orthodox principles are
given much importance in rural areas. These two poems not only talk of death
as the one which leads to grave but also show Emily’s belief in resurrection or
the judgement day. Her imagery in this poem moves on to such a higher level
where she imagines grave as a bed with a mattress and pillow.

As told earlier, Dickinson views death in various ways, she gives new
angles to death. She represents death as the one who asserts supreme form of
justice. It treats everyone in an equal way. She presents this view in the
following poem,
Not any higher stands the grave
For heroes than for man;
Not any nearer for the child
Then number three – score and ten,
This latest leisure equal lulls
The beggar and his queen
Propitiate this democrat
As summer’s afternoon.”
(Not any higher stands the grave)

Death is here personified as a democrat who cannot be appeased by anything except the human life. It doesn’t grant an exception to anyone be it a beggar or a queen.

Egbert. S.Oliver states about the themes used by Emily in the following way,

Her poetic business may be with a drop of dew, a robin in the garden, a locomotive (and she probably has the first durable poem in American literature on this mode of transportation), and the humming-bird as well as with God (always her neighbour and friend); love, immortality and death.7

In one of her poems, Emily says about the situation in the house where death has occurred and the funeral procession is accomplished. It goes as follows,
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)

Here she tells how the house which has recently (i.e. a day before) witnessed death presents an atmosphere of silence in the house. But that does not last long, because once a person dies people try to forget him and return to their normal routine. The phrases “sweeping up” and “putting away” indicate the broom and the dust pan. Here she tries to say how death sweeps away the love towards a dead person. Death of anyone does not stop the entire world; mourners mourn for a day or a two but again return to the chores of the world.

In her poem, “Just Lost, when I was saved,” she tells how she felt that she was so closer to achieve her life long desire i.e. immortality but was suddenly deprived of it. It shows how Emily longed to experience immortality.

Just Lost, when I was saved !

Just felt the world go by !

Just girt me for the onset with Eternity,

When breath blew back,
And on the other side
I heard recede the disappointed tide!"
(Just Lost, when I was Saved)

Emily generally speaks of death in a broader sense, she tried to unveil the secret of death and immortality and in this process of unveiling them, she put her thoughts and findings in the form of poetry. Death in this poem is presented as a fact but which is not yet tasted or explored by the poet. It expresses her disappointment when she is suddenly pushed away from death. So according to Emily these visions of death and immortality are almost common to everyone but they aren’t true, that vision is nothing more than a mirage. It is like an attempt made by the poet but unable to come to a conclusion. She describes the experience of moving back from death in the following way, continuing it further,

Therefore, as one returned, I feel,
Odd secrets of the line to tell!
Some sailor, striking foreign shores,
Some pale reporter from the awful doors
Before the seal!
(Just Lost, when I was saved)

She compares herself to a sailor who seems to have a distant view of foreign shores or a reporter who was about to open up the doors of some mystery but was unable to do so. She shows her helplessness and
disappointment. The poem evokes pity among the readers as the poet is unable to achieve her goal, her eternal desire.

The poem "I felt a funeral in my brain," is supposed to be one of the most disturbing poems of Emily Dickinson on death. It deals with the extremity of pain and moreover makes a comparison of spiritual death and physical death with a complete description of a funeral. She presents this poem in a way as if a true incident is being told,

I felt a funeral in my brain,
And mourners, to and fro,
Kept treading, treading, till it seemed
That sense was breaking through.

(I felt a funeral in my brain,)

This first stanza sets the entire tone of the poem. Before the beginning of actual funeral rites, the mourners move to and fro making the arrangements. The genius of Emily lies in portraying a dead person giving a commentary of her own funeral as if she is alive. It describes the oppression and annoyance of the poet over the harsh sounds of footsteps and drum beating (second stanza),

And when they all were seated,
A service like a drum
Kept beating, beating till I thought
My mind was going numb.”

(I felt a funeral in my brain,)
The traditional drum beating numbs the poet's mind. She tries to show that physical disturbance continues one after the other i.e. the treading sound goes away, as all are seated, giving its way to drum beating.

The third stanza describes the actual scene of burial, the final funeral rite. She can feel the weight of the box and once again the sound of the lead boots,

And then I heard them lift a box,
And creak across my soul
With those same boots of lead, again.
Then space began to toll."
(I felt a funeral in my brain,)

The final stanzas show the complete separation of the soul from the physical body where it can no longer feel the physical sensations, noise or any sort of disturbance. The reasoning ends here and she seems to be falling deep and deep into an abyss.

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary here –

And then a plank in Reason, broke,
And dropped down, and down –
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing – then -”

(I felt a funeral in my brain,)

The speaker seems to be very disturbed by the physical noise in the earlier stanzas, but in the later stanzas she seems to say that the disturbance that silence caused was more oppressive.

The flaw in this poem is it actually begins with the intention of describing a spiritual death which occurs in one’s brain but ends up describing a physical death. So the real intention and meaning of the poem stand unexplained and unexplored. What John B. Pickard says about this poem is,

The emphasis on dying sensation and failing powers suggests death’s dreadful isolation. On another level the initial phrase “in my Brain” hints that this physical death represents some terrible emotional pain or loss that brings an overwhelming sense of despair. In an original interpretation of the poem George Monteiro holds that it deals with the direct knowledge of the absolute when the soul gains a temporary insight into the infinite. Death symbolizes this, since it is one of the few crucial experiences that reveals a glimpse of final things. Monteiro concludes that the poem combines both triumph and failure for man must return to reality after breaking through the barriers of sense into infinity.

Emily was sentimentally attached for the Eternal, for the long lasting.

This permanent fulfillment of affection on the Earth is pictured in her poems of
love, death and immortality. She projects her ideas about this in one of her letters dated November 11, 1851 addressed to Austen,

How lonely It was last night when the chilly wind went down and the clear, cold moon was shining -It seemed to me I could pack this little earthly bundle and bidding the word Good-bye, fly away and away, and never come back again to be so lonely here, and then I thought of “Hepzibah” how sorrowful she was, and how she longed to sleep, because the grave was peaceful..........”

Another way that Emily treats immortality is through love, she considers love, to be immortal, and one who possesses love also becomes eternal.

I live with Him – I hear his voice –
I stand alive – today –
To witness to the certainty
Of Immortality –
Taught me – by time – the lower way –
Conviction – every day –
That Life like this – is stopless –
Be Judgement – what is may –
(I live with Him – I hear his voice –)

Emily was not only dragged towards Heaven because of immortality, but also, it acted as a shield to hide her pains and agonies of the Earth, of the physical and materialistic world. R.R.Jones remarks:
The inward feelings of intensity and breath that it produced almost made her believe that she was in 'heaven' now. Just as this force brought her in to a 'heavenly' realm, so the realm of 'immortality' surrounded her with vast spiritual extents that denied the limits of time and space. Thus 'immortality' as a force and realm, offered a 'heaven' that was more accessible, immediate and secure. Such a 'heaven' appealed strongly to Emily Dickinson, and she made every effort to substitute it for the Puritan one.  

Thus, the most remarkable poems of Emily Dickinson deal with the themes of death and immortality. She weaves these two themes in a beautiful web, where the reader gets stuck up in the confusing threads of Emily's thoughts. She thought, investigated, and probed death so much, that she seems to have died every moment of her life. This passion, this obsession of hers made her analyze what really does a dying person feel. Talking of Emily's theme of death, Thomas. W.Ford says,  

There can be little question that death was her central theme. Clearly it colored all her thinking and gave its tint to the majority of her poems. Even in her lighter verse, death slyly peeks ut, largely hidden but nonetheless there. To call this concern "morbid" as some have done, is to miss the point. For Emily Dickinson, death was the one unmistakable, thought undefinable, force in an equivocal universe. Punctual, reliable, dependable, inevitable, absolute – it was the one certainty in a world of uncertainties. A totally independent power, it emerged as the focal point in her thought, her central subject of

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inquiry. It rose above all else – supreme, omnipresent and omnipotent. Little wonder that death became, in effect her poetic principle. 10
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