

Chapter III

Theme of Death and Immortality : Peril as Possession

Emily Dickinson lives as a pivotal figure in American poetic tradition in her vision of death. The *ubiquitousness of loss or pain in most of her poems expresses a fascinating concatenation of relationship between the concepts of life and death.* There are multifarious reasons for Emily Dickinson's obfuscating obsession with death. The obsession may be described as a psychological device to confine the unanswerable anxieties raised by the circumstances of her life within her unconscious mind. This obsession may also be interpreted as an outcome of her menace of agonizing mortality.

According to feminist critics her preoccupation with death was caused by her experience of social powerlessness which was reinforced by the religious myths of the American culture of her age. Moreover the feminist inquiry offers a broadened perspective on Emily Dickinson's obsession with the theme of death. Feminist critics feel that in the poetic realm of Emily Dickinson there dwells a figure which is unidentifiable. This elusive masculine form dominates in her mind. Emily Dickinson is highly preoccupied with this facet

of masculinity that is perceived as omnipotent, fascinating and deadly. This masculine power is named as God, death or seemingly as some particular unnamed man. But the recent feminist critics contrived new theories concerning Emily Dickinson's fixation with the theme of death. Her views on death have assumed a newly gendered meaning in the context of feminist and deconstructive questions. Her views are now credited with deconstructing gender oppositions and rewriting the conventionally gendered relationships between the poet and her literary tradition.

Celeste Schenck a feminist critic considers elegy as an essential testing ground for any idea of literary tradition and women's particularity of tradition. According to Celeste Schenck pastoral elegy can be defined as a male genre. It is traditionally "modelled on archaic initiating rituals of younger man by an elder", it marks a rite of separation that culminates in ascension to stature; it rehearses an act of identity that depends upon rupture" (15). Celeste Schenck brings out the contrast between the elegiac note in male literary texts and female literary texts by defining the female elegy as "a poem of connectedness, women inheritors seem to achieve poetic identity in relation to ancestresses in connection to the dead" (23). Women's connectedness and man's rituals of

separation are put in contrast by Celeste Schenck. Though Emily Dickinson has not written several elegies in particular, the elegiac strain in her poems on death can be studied and interpreted in the context of other women writers—Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, Adrienne Rich and Anne Sexton. They all differ from the traditional masculine "initiatory" models. Their elegiac texts revise our understanding to the elegy's traditional relationship with sexuality. According to Celeste Schenck the elegist's figuration of "loss or gain" must work toward a trope for sexual power (32).

When we explore Emily Dickinson's relationship with other women writers concerning the elegiac note and melancholic strain of their poems we will become aware of Emily Dickinson's admiration of Emily Bronte's elegy "No Coward Soul Is Mine." This poem was read by Thomas Wentworth Higginson at Emily Dickinson's funeral. Charlotte Bronte in the preface to this poem says that "the following are the last lines my sister Emily ever wrote"! (qtd. in Dickinson And The Boundaries of Feminist Theory 41)

Though earth and moon were gone
 And suns and universes ceased to be,
 And Thou wert left alone,
 Every existence would exist in Thee.

There is not room for Death,
Not atom that his might could render void:
Thou-Thou art Being and Breath,
And what Thou art may never be destroyed.

Emily Bronte's self-authored elegy exhibits her heroism in the face of death. Emily Dickinson's many poems on death contain Emily Bronte's views on death. Anne Sexton's elegy for John Holmes, "Somewhere in Africa" centres round a female figure. She says that "God who is a woman" bears Holmes always in her hold. Maternity and female sexuality in this troped consolation and consolidation of power merge. But this can be defined as the patriarchally prescribed resolution of women's psycho sexual development. Most of Dickinson's poems on death also like Anne Sexton's elegy contain the feminine expression of the concepts of God and life.

Emily Dickinson adroitly explores the anatomy of death. She analyses different kinds of death, and various kinds of fear which mortals have to undergo before death. Even in her adolescent years Emily Dickinson seems often to have been preoccupied with the subject of death. In a letter to her friend Jane Humphrey, for example, she wrote how she would look if she were lying dead with a little white gown on and a snow drop blossom ornamenting her body:

I'm a naughty, bad girl to say sad things and make you cry, but I think of the grave very often, and how much it has got of mine, and whether I can ever stop it from carrying off what love..... (ESL 86)

The thoughts about death visited her mind too often. She unfortunately met the death of her own friend Sofia Holland when she was only thirteen and she wrote with deep sorrow:

Then it seemed to me I should die too if I could not be permitted to watch over her or even to look at her face. At length the doctor said she must die and allowed me to look at her a moment through the open door. I took off my shoes and stole softly, to the sick room. There she lay mild and beautiful as in health and her pale features lit up with an earthly smile" (qtd. in Emily Dickinson's poetry: The Flood Subjects 109)

Emily Dickinson narrated her reaction when she confronted the death of her friend for the first time in her life. In the last decade of her life however the death of friends and relatives like Samuel Bowles, Josiah Holland, Charles Wadsworth, Otis Lord, her mother, and her eight-year-old nephew Gilbert proved to be almost overwhelming to a woman of her sensitivity. Two years before her death, in a letter to her old friend Mr. Samuel Mack she wrote:

The Dyings have been too deep for
me, and before I could raise my Heart
from one, another has come (ESL 939)

Emily Dickinson's poetry reflects this same lifelong preoccupation with death.

Female Psychic Death

Emily Dickinson uses her intellectual and poetic freedom to challenge traditional religious belief especially those that cluster about the concept of a transcendent male deity—a sovereign God. She rejected all kinds of religious truth that made man insignificant and helpless before the crushing force of God. In many poems like "Abraham to kill him" (CPE 1317) and "of God we ask one favour" (CPE 1601) she satirizes the orthodox belief that all men are responsible for

the sin of the first parents. In one of her poems "Heavenly Father - take to thee" (CPE 1461), she comments on God's duplicity for creating men with original sin and then condemning them for fulfilling their nature. She wrote:

"Heavenly Father" take to thee
 The supreme iniquity
 Fashioned by thy candid Hand
 In a moment contraband -
 Though to trust us - seem to us
 More respectful - "We are Dust" -
 We apologize to thee
 For thine own Duplicity - (CPE 1461)

Though Emily Dickinson could not accept conventional religion, she retained unshakable trust in God's actual reality and continually re-examined older fundamental concepts like the Trinity, Resurrection, Hell, angels, and immortality. In many of her poems on death Emily Dickinson projected herself as a rebel against religious orthodoxy. She twists the strands of puritan and sentimental concepts of God into a critique of both. Her religious poetry is at once an exploration of key ideas: death, immortality and the nature of God, and a vehement and passionate protest against the values androcentric religion encodes, whether in its clavinist or puritan form.

Emily Dickinson stresses the inevitability of death too often and she has got the extraordinary skill in exploring the human misery and sufferings. She writes:

....Men did - externally -
 It is a truth - of Blood -
 But we are dying in Drama -
 And Drama - is never dead - (CPE 531)

Many of her poetic narrative of pain and suffering describe the relationship between suffering and narcissism. When the self has been dehumanized by pain physical or physical nature sometimes comes to rescue. To accept that end is the only heroism left to a self. Dickinson makes the gulf between the existential reality of human suffering and the impervious narcissism of divine. Psycho analytic theories, associate suffering with feminine and narcissism of divine with 'masculine'. But Emily Dickinson's poems exhibit both these qualities:

No drug for consciousness
 Alternative to did
 Is Nature's only pharmacy
 For Being's Malady (CPE 786)

She depicts death as the healer of human sufferings. Emily Dickinson associated psychological completion with death. In this aspect she resembles Shelley to whom death is essentially

the absence or ruin of Eros. For Keats also, with his faith in the senses, death is part of the body and part therefore of Eros. Emily Dickinson's concept of associating psychic completion with death reveals her fortitude and courage in facing death. The rereading of Emily Dickinson's poems, on death in the context of gynocritique reveals her female heroism in welcoming death as nature's rescue and nature's remedy for the battle of human life. Repeatedly Dickinson reminds us of the advantages of death. She also reminds us of the advantages of bereavement. According to feminist critics, these disturbing attitudes are secondary manifestations of her anxiety of gender. Her dread of being mastered impelled her into a flight from the normative biological and social roles available to women in her time and place. This flight initially marks her entry into a world of solitude and renunciation and finally the world of death. She has got the peculiar quality of associating extreme pain or sorrow with death and burial. In one of her poems, by using funeral images with their suggestions of a passage from one state to another she has shown us the divided personality, gradually losing control of its rational and lapsing into the 'other' self of insanity.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
 And Mourners to and fro
 Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
 That sense was breaking through -

And when they all were seated,
 A service, like a Drum -
 Kept beating - beating - till I thought
 My Mind as going numb -

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,

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 I dropped down, and down -
 And hit a world, at every plunge -
 And finished knowing then - (CPE 280)

Emily Dickinson, for fifteen years up to her twenty fifth year,
 lived on Pleasant Street, from where she watched the funeral

procession of Amherest passing by to the adjacent cemetery. That is why in many of her poems she offers a perfect portrayal of burial scenes and funeral porcession. In this above mentioned poem, the emphasis on dying sensations and falling powers suggests death's dreadful isolation. But 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. Since the soul has lost its reason for living, the person ceases to exist. The poem is not merely the description of burial scenes and funeral procession. But the poet tries to connect the intensity of mental suffering with the act of the flnal departure of the soul, without any hope of immortality, (only a despairing plunge into an eternal abyss)

In the context of feminist psycho analytic theory this poem can be defined as a feminine expression of madness that springs from extreme mental agony. Emily Dickinson refers to madness and frantic moods too often in most of her poems. She says "Much madness is divines sense" (CPE 435)

When a feminist critic looks into a woman writer's mind, she often sees rage, alienation and self-doubt and she considers patriarchy as the root cause of such feelings. So the feminist writers come to the conclusion that what unifies women's writing is the psychology of oppression, the psychology of women living under patriarchy. More recently Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar

describe nineteenth century women writers as enraged "mad women" whispering their secrets from patriarchal attics. Alienated and derogated, expected to nurture others while not being nurtured themselves these writers developed a language of madness, confinement, anger and solitude. So Emily Dickinson being one of such literary women often expresses somekind of indefinable madness and miserable experiences. In this above mentioned poem she connected this theme with her knowledge of burial scenes and funeral procession. She associates death and incurable sickness in one of her poems.

Death leaves Us homesick, who behind,
 Except that it is gone
 Are ignorant of its Concern
 As if it were not born

Through all their former Places, we
 Like Individuals go
 Who something lost, thee seeking for
 Is all that's left them, now - (CPE 935)

This poem can also be a finest evidence for Emily Dickinson's obsession with feelings like sickness, ^Scont_Aternation, loss and pain which are defined as typical feminine emotions engendered by patriarchy.

In another poem she describes the pangs of pain, a quickening breath and an over powering emotion at parting which denominates death. Again she narrates a death scene with characteristic brevity :

I've seen a Dying Eye
 Run round and round a Room -
 In search of something - as it seemed -
 Then Cloudler become -

 And then - Obscure with Fog -
 And then - be soldered down
 Without disclosing what it be
 'T were blessed to have seen - (CPE 547)

Her description of the "Dying Eye" which closely tries to have the last glance of everything around him manifests Dickinson's sickening mind which selects death as an image of emotional outpourings.

Awful Vacuum and Masculine Construct

In most of her poems, death represents the awful vacuum in her mind and the power of inevitable death, is identified with patriarchal power. In one of her poems she gives vent to her pent up feelings of victimisation and freedom

in a patriarchally confined universe through the image of sailors
fighting against a leak.

The Frost of Death was on the Pane -
"Secure Your Flower" said he,
Like Sailors fighting with a Leak
We fought Mortality.

Our passive Flower we held to Sea -
To Mountain - To the Sun -
Yet even on his Scarlet Shelf
To crawl the Frost begun -

We pried him back
Ourselves we wedged
Himself and her between
Yet easy as the narrow Snake
He forked his way along

Till all her helpless beauty bent
And then our wrath begun-
We hunted him to his Ravine
We chased him to his Den -

. We hated Death and hated Life
And nowhere was to go -
Than Sea and continent there is
A larger - it is Woe - (CPE 1136).

This is one of the longest poems of Dickinson on the agonizing battle against death. She symbolizes the patriarchal identification of passivity with women through the image of passive flower. "Our passive Flower we held to Sea" - Images the female sexuality confined within the androcentric definition of passivity or unassertive female submission. She adroitly expresses the woeful mind that hates both death and life. Frustrated and nullified by the meaningless, endless misery caused by the disgusting patterns of life forced by the androcentric culture Dickinson went to the farthest level of hating both death and life.

There is no other writer in American literary tradition who can be equated with Emily Dickinson in explaining the throes of death. She presents death as a sinister ghost, a ghost dressed in "Mechlin", with no sandal on his foot and with movement "like flakes of snow". The monstrous ghost comes out with noiseless laughter to capture its silent victim. She begins the poem with this first section.

The only Ghost I ever saw
 Was dressed in Mechlin - so -
 He wore no sandal on his foot
 And stepped like flakes of snow - (CPE 274)

Emily Dickinson's poems offer frequent references to ghost and demons. Ellen Moers in her book Literary Women deals with women writers' acquaintance with the world of ghosts and evil spirits. She feels that the savagery of girlhood or womanhood accounts in part for the persistence of the Gothic mode in women's literature. Fear and guilt, depression and anxiety clouded the domain of female creativity. So the self disgust, the self hatred and the impetus to self - destruction have become the prominent themes in the writings of women. Ellen Moers wrote in her book Literary Women.

Despair is hardly the exclusive province of any one sex or class in our age but to give visual form to the fear of self, to hold anxiety up to the Gothic mirror of the imagination, may well be more in the writings of women than of men (107).

Emily Dickinson's poems on death which depict the terrific awesome, images of ghosts and demons offer visual formation to her fear of self.

She portrays death as the fatal game of the Dæty playing with the helpless victims who could not escape from his dreadful claws. She talks of death as murder by degrees.

In one of her poems she compares the dying soul to the struggling mouse caught between the teeth of a cat. She narrates this terrorizing tale in the second section of her poem "The Whole of it come not at once" (CPE 762)

The Cat relieves the Mouse
 She eases from her teeth
 Just long enough; for Hope to tease -
 Then mashes it to death - (CPE 762)

In this poem Dickinson projects death as the personification of struggling female self. Female writers felt the need for portraying their struggling selves. As Ellen Moers says in her book Literary Women.

Nothing separates female experience from male experience more sharply and more early in life than the compulsion to visualize the self (107).

As a poet who explores the innate traits of death, she also emphasizes the incongruity of death in a world which is created by the all-pervading God. In one of her poems she writes :

How soft this prison is
 How sweet these sullen bars
 No Despot but the King of Down
 Invented this repose

 Of Fate if this is All
 Has he no added Realm
 A Dungeon but a Kinsman is
 In carceration - Home(CPE 1334).

The inconsistent nature of death, which can both be a healer and a ghost is depicted in this poem. But the use of prison, dungeon and confining home images characterise the literary women's feelings circumscribed within the patriarchal culture. So Emily Dickinson's association of prison with death symbolizes the female powerlessness.

Dickinson's poetics of difference plays a vital role in her poems on death. Unlike other writers of her period she portrays death as a character. Death is depicted as an ardent lover, gentleman caller, and a supple suitor. She describes death as a "supple suitor".

Death is the Supple Suitor
 That wins at last -
 It is a stealthy Wooing
 Conducted first

By pallid innuendoes
 And dim approach
 But brave atlast with Bugles
 And a bisected coach

 It bears away in triumph
 To Troth unknown
 And Kindred as responsive
 As Porcelain (CPE 1445)

She portrays the transition from life to death as a coach ride. The wooing of death, the nature of the course of love narrated in this poem exposes Dickinson's emphasis on female identity.

The speaker of the poem, who is wooed by death - the ardent lover - is always a female partner who after attaining identity as a lover, bride or as a wife enters into the realm of immortality. In one of his much-discussed poem "Because I could not stop for Death" (CPE 712), She introduces three figures the bride, the lover and immortality. In this poem which is entitled as "Chariot" Dickinson sums up the resources of a religious tradition which in its mid-victorian incarnation insisted on the moment of dying as a test of faith. In this poem Allen Tate remarks "She has presented a typical christian theme in its final irresolution, without making any final statements about it" (22). This is one of Emily Dickinson's finest poems dealing with a carriage ride to elernity: The first two stanzas introduces the travellers in the chariot.

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 my leisure too,
 For His Civility - (CPEE 712)

Death is depicted as a civil, affable complaisant gentleman and he is considered as the envoy of God sent to escort the persona to her heavenly marriage. But he is quite different from the figure in "Death is the supple Suitor" (CPE 1445). There is nothing "stealthy" about his "wooing" nor does he operate through "pallid innuendos". He is a kindly and gracious gentleman in whose "Civility" the persona can have complete confidence. In order to have a pleasant ride with the gentleman the speaker of the poem has to put away her activities and to neglect her "leisure too". So death is presented as an intrusion into nature and not an aspect of it. The next stanza can be defined as the speaker's attempt to have a last glance at the familiar scenes and it pictuarises the placid, tranquil and unperturbed mind of the traveller, sitting at the side of her lover. The poet narrates the bridal dress of the lady using extremely effective feminine imagery.

For only Gossamer, My Gown -

My Tippet - only Tulle - (CPE 712)

Commenting on these above lines Charles Anderson suggests that these lines reinforce the idea that the persona is being escorted to a union with God. He says:

This is certainly not a description of conventional burial clothes. It is instead a bridal dress, but of a very special sort "Gossamer" in her day was not yet applied to fine spun cloth but only to that filmy substance like cobwebs sometime seen floating in the autumn air, as her Lexicon described it..... And by transforming the bridal veil into a "Tippet" the flowing scarf like part of the distinctive hood of holy orders, she is properly dressed for a celestial marriage (qtd. in The Use of persona in Emily Dickinson's Poetry 62)

The narration of the bridal chamber invokes mild horror in the minds of the readers.

We paused before a House that seemed

A Swelling of the Ground -

The Roof was scarcely visible -

The Cornice - in the Ground -(CPE 712).

Her bridal chamber is a horrifying combination of an actual mansion and the swelling mound of a grave-yard tomb. The last stanza brings out the speaker's actual realisation of her journey towards immortality.

Traditionally^l in literature approaches towards death have been religious or philosophical. But Emily Dickinson transformed the conventional interpretations by her bold fusion of romance and death. She appears as a skillful woman artist in interpreting death in its two different kinds of states - physical and non-physical states. In most of her poems she depicts the different states of mind which is actually dead. The dead state of mind and the depressed mind find its place in Dickinson's poetry.

Psycho analytic literary criticism insists that literary texts can be understood as the human mind is understood. Within a cultural context, psycho analysis aims ^{at} ~~to~~ understanding individuals by uncovering desires hidden deep within their minds and revealing their connections with the conscious surface. This approach^{of} ~~a~~ mind can be applied to texts as well. In the texts there will be symbolic expression of unconscious wishes, locked up in the depth of the mind of the individual writer. Emily Dickinson's poems on death can be interpreted from this perspective. Her desire to express the female powerlessness to get rid of agonising life, and to establish female identity

find expression in her poems on death. Feminist psycho analytic theories associate Emily Dickinson's pre-occupation with death, with the patriarchal setting of the culture and religion in which she lived.

Split Self : Feminine Traits

Emily Dickinson's primary concern with immortality as the "Flood subject" receives the attention of varied critics and readers. Immortality is one of the cardinal faiths in Christianity and belief in immortality presuppose an unquestioning belief in God as well as in the existence of the soul. Many recent feminist critics feel that Emily Dickinson explores and enquires religious truth, and mysteries of all pervading God in order to reject it. But she believes that "This world is not conclusion" (CPE 501). She asserts that this world is not the final end of human life, for there is a life beyond it. Worldly existence therefore co-exists with immortality. Death opens a new life beyond. But immortality cannot be proved by any means :

This World is not Conclusion,
A Species stands beyond -
Invisible as Music -
But positive, as Sound -
It beckons, and it baffles - (CPE 501).

According to her, to doubt immortality is a blunder, and its presence can be felt in everyday life.

The Blunder is in estimate
 Eternity is there
 We say as of a Station
 Meanwhile he is so near
 He joins me in my Ramble
 Divides abode with me
 No Friend have I that so persists
 As this Eternity (CPE 1684)

She considers eternity as her inseparable friend. She feels that those who doubt the existence of immortality cannot attain fulfilment in their lives. According to her they had only partial ^{live} in this world.

Those not live yet
 Who doubt to live again -
 "Again" is of a twice
 But this - is - one (CPE 1454).

Life in earth and life in heaven are not two but one. Death is only a hyphen between mortality and immortality. Thus man carries immortality in his immortal soul which according to the poet, is a "Costumeless Consciousness".

How firm Eternity must look
 To crumbling men like me
 The only Adamant Estate
 In all Identity (CPE 1499)

Emily Dickinson has written many poems expressing her deep faith in Heaven and immortality. But her mind was assailed with harrowing doubts regarding God, Heaven and immortality. Her faith as well as her doubt was expressed with equal emphasis and competence in most of her poems. She was heretical, heterodox in her religious opinions and stayed away from church and dogma. So her poems on Heaven and immortality are an attempt made by her to condense that range of psychic experience into the form of poetry. Her poems on immortality remain as gestures of both confidence and diffidence. Her belief in immortality was also not free from doubts and she has overtly expressed them in several of her poems. She herself expressed in one of her poems on immortality that she could not comprehend the perfection and the glory of the eternal life to come. Her unconventional attitudes towards Heaven and immortality is described in the following poem:

Their Height in Heaven comforts not -
 Their Glory - nought to me -
 'Twas best imperfect - as it was -
 I'm finite - I can't see -

The House of supposition -
 The Glimmering Frontier that
 Skirts the Acres of Perhaps -
 To Me - shows insecure -

 The Wealth I had - contented me -
 If 'twas a meaner size -
 Then I had counted it until
 It pleased my narrow Eyes -

 Better than larger values -
 That show however true -
 This timid life of Evidence
 Keeps pleading - "I don't know". (CPE 696).

Heaven is considered as "the house of Supposition". It is not a place of concrete reality which could stand apart from the human mind. The existence of Heaven is equivocal according to Emily Dickinson. Its dubious existence is like "acres of perhaps" which is embellished by the glimmering frontiers created by the yearning of the human mind. The last two lines of the poem "This timid life of Evidence/Keeps Pleading - "I don't know"/enumerate the poet's attempt to analyse her own divided personality - the split self. She used the term "timid" to denote the failure in her attempt to explore the mysterious truths of worldly life which transcend the need of

evidence. She feels that this worldly life with whatever wealth it possesses, is more satisfying by its limited certitude and she says that this "timid life of Evidence" does not know and keeps on pleading its ignorance. Emily Dickinson's paradoxical conviction regarding heaven and immortality reflects her split-personality. According to Ellen Moers, the compulsion to visualize the self is one of the dominant feminine traits, Christina Rossetti in her "A Royal Princess" offers a convincing picture of a self :

All my walls are lost in mirrors, Whereupon I trace
 Self to right hand, self to left hand, Self in every
place,
 Self-same solitary figure, self-same seeking face.

Emily Dickinson portrays her seeking - self and her quest for knowing the unknown mysteries of life after death. In another poem she compares the "Heaven" of worldly existence and the heaven to come after the earthly life. She explains that this worldly existence with all kinds of woes and worries is free from the doubt of its existence.

Which is best ? Heaven -
 Or only Heaven to come
 With that old Codicil of Doubt?
 I cannot help esteem

The "Bird within the Hand"
 Superior to the one
 The "Bush" may yield me
 Or may not
 Too late to choose again (CPE 1012)

Emily Dickinson's fluctuating views on heaven and immortality are given expression in the above mentioned poem. She feels that the faith in the existence of heaven is really a deprivation of this world of ours that is, depriving people of this world of what they have, the world of concrete values and ideas. Emily Dickinson remains as a problematic, enigmatic figure in her views on heaven and immortality :

That it will never come again
 Is what makes life so sweet.
 Believing what we don't believe
 Does not exhilarate.
 That if it be, it be at best
 An ablative estate -
 This instigates an appetite
 Precisely opposite (CPE 1741)

According to Emily Dickinson the act of pretending to believe what we actually don't believe will lead to unhappiness. She feels that ostentatious faith in religious doctrines cannot make

any one hilarious or merry. The patriarchal religious culture and its rigid rules and schemes made Emily Dickinson to write such poems of skepticism and disbelief. In one of her early poems she wrote :

Going to Heaven !
 I don't know when -
 Pray do not ask me how !
 Indeed I'm too astonished
 To think of answering you !
 Going to Heaven !
 How dim it sounds !
 And yet it will be done
 As sure as flocks go home at night
 Unto the Shepherd's arm !
 Perhaps you're going too !
 Who knows ?
 If you should get there first
 Save just a little space for me (CPE 79)

Her eagerness to go to heaven and to have a permanent, secure place in it, is described in this poem. She also expressed her preference for the mortal life. This conflict between faith and doubt in the existence of heaven and immortality exhibits her split self. Her aversion and antagonism towards the

intransigent norms and rules of patriarchal .religious culture is deep rooted in her unconscious mind which gets .expression in her art of poetry .

Poetry is too much rooted in the unconscious; it presses too close against the barriers of repression; and the nineteenth century woman had much to repress (113).

It is extremely an agonizing experience for a woman to live - split between a publicly acceptable image of a woman and her own individual self which she perceives as the essential. Dickinson often gives expression to this thought and she pictuarises the danger in living to the expectations of others (particularly male-divised norms and patterns).

Much Madness is divinest sense -
 To a discerning Eye -
 Much sense - the starkest Madness
 'Tis the Majority
 In this, as All, prevail -
 Assent - and you are sane -
 Demur - You're straight way dangerous -
 And handled with a chain - (CPE 435)

The stresses of this splitting made literary women passive and to deny their independence and creativity to extreme consequences. When they try to fulfil the expectations of others by ignoring the specific values of their own inner-selves it leads them to self imposed silence, solitude, recurrent depression and self renunciation.

• For the woman poet anger, depression and silence frequently occur because of psychic death when her individuality and identity of her self is denied. She writes :

Me from Myself - to banish -

Had I Art -

Impregnable my Fortress

Unto All Heart -

But since Myself - assault Me -

How have I peace

Except by subjugating

Consciousness ?

And since We're mutual Monarch

How this be

Except by Abdication .

Me - of Me ? (CPE 642)

Most of Emily Dickinson's poems aim at depicting the self and forces within the self. The conflict between these two factors form the basis of her poems on immortality.

Emily Dickinson rejected the dogmas of the puritan orthodoxy and at the same time refused to share the position held by the materialists. But she is not mocking at the belief in immortality. In moments of intense emotional stress and tragedy she expressed her doubt about immortality. But Emily Dickinson expresses her willingness to accept everything which can be rationalized. In one of her poems she makes an attempt to explain the difference between faith and reason.

When I count the seeds
That are sown beneath
To bloom so, bye and bye -
When I con the people -
Lain so low,
To be received as high -
When I believe the garden
Mortal shall not see -
Pick by faith it's blossom
And avoid it's Bee
I can spare this summer, unreluctantly (CPE 40)

According to Emily Dickinson the growth of the seed into a plant is a resurrection of the plant after death. This process can be compared to the life of the dead, (buried low in the grave) in heaven. Heaven is here depicted as the garden of God which cannot be seen by the mortals. The 'bee' symbolizes the rational mind. So she does not want to pluck the flower (immortality) by avoiding the bee. She projects herself as a rebellious woman against the orthodox religion and shows her readiness to accept every thing which is based on reason but not on blind faith.

. Most of Emily Dickinson's poems depict the link between human life and immortality. Death is depicted as the messenger sent by God to take the soul into the realm of immortality. In the following poem she narrates the journey to the world of immortality.

Our journey had advanced -
 Our feet were almost come
 To that odd Fork in Being's Road -
 Eternity - by Term -

Our pace took sudden awe -
 Our feet - reluctant - led -
 Before - were Cities - but Between
 The Forest of the Dead -

Retreat - was our of Hope -
 Behind - a Sealed Route -
 Eterity's White Flag - Before -
 And God - at every Gate (CPE 615).

This poem expresses the poet's firm belief in immortality, heaven and God and it narrates the journey to heaven passing "the Forest of the Dead". She, often compares the mutability of the mortal life with the changelessness and permanent happiness in the kingdom of heaven. In one of her poems she asserts this truth emphatically :

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 -
 'Tis kingdoms - afterward - they say -
 In perfect - pauseless Monarchy
 Whose prince - is Son of None -
 Himself - His Dateless Dynasty -
 Himself - Himself diversify -
 In Duplicate divine -
 '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 Maelstorm - in the Sky - (CPE 721)

She describes the nature of mortal existence in between eternity and immortality. Death of the mortal life is the mist which dissolves into the dawn of immortality. She narrates the kingdom of heaven and its perfect perpetual serenity and she considers it as a perpetual abode of souls. The image of everchanging crescent in a turbulent sea enveloped with darkness both in the north and south symbolizes the everchanging mortal life. Here in this poem maelstorm is associated with male power. Maelstorm as described in this poem has threatened the everchanging crescent in the sea. She contrasted the eternal repose in heaven with troubles and turmoils of the worldly life. When we explore Emily Dickinson's thematic concern with death and immortality we can readily accept with the feminist perspective that her social powerfulness and the awful vacuum in her mind created by the androcentric culture forced her to write repeatedly poems after poems on death and immortality. She not only depicts physical death but the different kinds of psychic death caused by depression and self-diminution. But she as a woman and as a woman poet knows very well how to "select her own society".

The Soul selects her own society
 Then shuts the door;
 To her divine majority -
 Present no more

Unmoved - she notes the Chariots - pausing -
 At her low Gate -
 unmoved -an Emperor be kneeling
 Upon her Mat -

I've known her - from an ample nation -
 Choose one -
 Then - close the valves of her attention
 Like stone - (CPE 303)

A close reading of the poem reveals a uniquely woman's gesture of selecting her own society and shutting the door on the rest. The latter part of the poem focuses on her firmness, on the assertion of her 'divine majority'. It is this courage to be in solitude with her soul that led her to contemplate such themes as Death, and Immortality. She knew very well that when reality is unalterable the self must adjust to those "larger - Darknenses / Those Evenings of the Brain -" by adopting a defensive posture of strategic withdrawal. She asserts with firmness in the concluding stanza of her poem "We grow accustomed to the Dark"(CPE 419).

Either the Darkness alters
 Or something in the sight -
 Adjust itself to Midnight -
 And Life steps almost straight, (CPE 419)

She says that the self should have the power to adjust to odd circumstances. The heart which is stiffened by despair welcomes death as nature's rescue. Emily Dickinson explained to Mrs. Holland in a letter.

I suppose there are depths in every
 consciousness from which we cannot
 rescue ourselves - to which none
 can go with us - which represent
 to us Mortality - the Adventure of
 Death (ESL 555)

Emily Dickinson's preoccupation with death denotes her rejection of self-annihilation caused by androcentric culture and her own personal disappointment in her life. As David Bakan observes in his book Disease pain and Sacrifice: Toward a psychology of suffering

Death may be consequence of internal
 defense mechanisms which while
 initially successful in warding off the
 threat of annihilation to the organism
 become over stimulated and self
 injurious (28)

From the perspective of David Bakan, Dickinson's fixation with the theme of death can be considered as one of her devices to express her desire to escape from the clutches of human life. But death is the essential part of life as Freud declares:

The instincts of self - preservation, of self - assertion and of mastery are component instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death.....(13).

Emily Dickinson's poems on death and immortality reveals her vast knowledge about God, Heaven and Immortality. Though feminist critics explain various causes for her pre-occupation with the theme of death and immortality, Emily Dickinson remains unparalleled as a woman in her outlook on death and immortality.