

**CHAPTER-VI**  
**A ROMANTIC WITH A DIFFERENCE**

## Chapter VI

### A Romantic with a Difference

The age of Dickinson is the nineteenth century, the era of American Romanticism. It began in the realm of poetry as a tame imitation of British Romanticism with William Cullen Bryant (1794 - 1878), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807 - 1882), John Greenleaf Whittier (1807 - 1892) and others. It gained a distinct voice of its own in Ralph Waldo Emerson (1802 - 1882), Walt Whitman (1819 - 1872) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809 - 1849). Emily Dickinson's poetry also manifests some broad characteristics of romanticism such as subjectivity, a sense of alienation and concern for nature. Her theory of poetry too reveals her romantic leanings. To a significant extent, she adheres to Wordsworth's idea of poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" or shares Coleridge's organicist thought about poetry. For her also, as for Coleridge, words are living organisms. Words assume a life of their own once they are uttered:

A word is dead  
When it is said,  
Some say.  
I say it just  
Begins to live  
That day. (1212)

Her observation on poetry as told to Higginson on August 16, 1870 (according to Higginson's letter to his wife) also illustrates her romantic conception about poetry :

If I read a book (and) it makes my whole body so cold no fire  
ever can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as  
if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.  
These are the only way I know it ... . (letters Vol. II : 474)

Like the romantics also, she conceives the poet as a visionary. A poet's rich vision reveals the mystery of things and "distills amazing sense from ordinary meanings", from "the familiar species / that perished by the Door" (448). So Dickinson's conception of poets and poetry certainly aligns her with the romantics.

Yet as a poet, she shows a "complex and problematic" relationship with the romantic tradition, deviating considerably from the romantic poets as she combines her romantic view of the poets and poetry with her modernist poetic technique and language use. She also deviates from the romantic sensibility in her unflinching sense of realism. Romanticism is, in a significant way, a flight from the present to the past or to the future or to a world of dream. Almost all the romantic poets demonstrate this characteristic in one way or the other. True, material and social reality matter little in Dickinson. Yet she never exhibits romantic escapism. Intense probing of the inner reality of the human self with its complex and often disturbing psychological states establishes her as a supreme realist. The findings of the modern psychology corroborate her poetic insight into human psyche. The vision of helplessness and vulnerability in her poetry radically revises the comforting Emersonian and Whitmanesque concept of the self and has few parallels in the nineteenth-century Anglo-American romantic literature. Ever conscious of the contradictions and plurality of life, Dickinson, unlike the nineteenth-century poets in general, shows a tendency towards ambivalence and indeterminacy in the manner of her thinking that clearly impact her poetic technique. She never settles for any single truth and delights in contradiction. However, she defies our attempt to put her in a definitive category. She is a critical transcendentalist and a rebellious puritan at the same time, and also a feminist in her own way. Similarly, notwithstanding her romantic tendencies, Dickinson is a romantic with a difference. She differs considerably from the typical romantic poets in her treatment of many subjects. Her distinctiveness is especially noticeable in her approach to three major concerns of romanticism. These three core areas are a sense of alienation felt

by the romantic writers in general, subjectivity and vision of nature.

Alienation, in a loose general sense, may be considered a significant mark of the romantic poets. The British romantic poets, especially, the major five of them actually felt that they were outsiders. Allan Rodway in The Romantic Conflict (1963) discusses this alienated consciousness of the Romantic poets and comes to the conclusion that Romanticism is not all joy, hope and ecstasy as Abrams suggests in Natural Supernaturalism (1971). Rodway feels that romantic conflict can be explained by the "hypothesis that romanticism is the expression of the artist as outcast" (Rodway 48). Some common romantic features such as subjectivity, extremism and experimentation arose from this outcast feeling. They justify Joanne Feit Diehl's observation, made in a different context, that "The most radical verbal experimentation may come after all from those poets who feel themselves cast out, who perceive a difference between themselves and the tradition ...." (Diehl, 7). <sup>Dickinson</sup> This outcast complex, argues Rodway, also accounts for the predominance of the outcast figures such as the wandering Jew, the ancient mariner, the solitary etc. in Romantic poetry. This sense of estrangement also explains, says Rodway, the influence of Schiller's The Robbers and also the attraction of Macbeth, Hamlet and The Tempest in each of which the principal character is a "brooding outcast" (Rodway 48). Other important romantic characteristics of egotism, individualism, primitivism and melancholy, Rodway further argues, may also grow out of this outcast feelings, from the painful sense that one's society and tradition and consequently one's own state of mind are unsatisfactory.

The writings of the major romantic poets amply demonstrate their alienated consciousness and the concomitant lonesomeness and despair. Romantics are not the "last of the happy whole persons in the western tradition" says E.D. Hirsch (qtd. in Romantic Cruxes 28). Thomas MacFarland argues in his book Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin : Wordsworth, Coleridge and the Modalities of Fragmentation (1981) that incompleteness, fragmentation and unhappiness

co-exist with the much celebrated sense of joy in Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron. MacFarland also observes that the central truth of romanticism is the "unhappy consciousness" (Romantic Cruxes 30). Judith Shklar, a modern commentator, justifies the use of the phrase in relation to Romanticism :

The aesthetic revolt of romanticism was ... only part of a more general dissatisfaction with the entire age. If we look deeper ... we discover a specific consciousness described by Hegel as "unhappy consciousness". This is the alienated soul that has lost its faith in the beliefs of the past, having been disillusioned by skepticism, but is unable to find a new home .... Hopelessly torn between memory and yearning, it can neither accept the present nor face the new world ...(Shklar 15-16)

The reasons for this sense of alienation are many. Socio-historical causes apart, fundamental reason seems to be in their disposition. Romantic poets being intensely self-conscious, felt estranged from their environment. In consequence, "Incompleteness, fragmentation and ruin" became the essential determinants of the romantic sensibility". (MacFarland, Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin 5-10). Even Wordsworth, the supposed apostle of calm joy, laments that he was "beset by troubles strange/ Many and strange that hung about his life" (Wordsworth: Poems IV 273). The following lines from book X(ten) of The Prelude also tellingly demonstrate the extent of despair in Wordsworth:

I scarcely had one night of quiet sleep  
Such ghastly visions had I of despair  
And tyranny, and implements of death

.....  
A sense of treachery and desertion in the place  
The holiest of I knew of, my own soul

(The Prelude, 10. 374/381, 1805 version)

(The Prelude, book X 374/381, 1805 version)

Many such examples of Wordsworth's anguished self abound in The Prelude (book Ten):

Thus I fared  
 Dragging all passions, notions, shapes of faith,  
 . . . now believing,  
 Now disbelieving, endlessly perplexed.

(The Prelude, lines 889/894, 1805 version)

Macfarland believes Wordsworth's "repeated invocation to joy . . . can be seen as attempts to deny the contrary" (Romantic Cruxes 28). He considers "Immortality Ode" a "bleak poem" : "The logical burden of the poem is depression . . . at the haunted sense that "the things which I have seen now can see no more", at the certain knowledge that "There hath past away a glory from the earth" (ibid 29). So although Wordsworth sings of joy and love, he "did not avert his eyes" from anguish or evil and the "World was to him in the end "this unintelligible world" (Abrams, The Correspondent Breeze 148). Coleridge's "Dejection:An Ode" too is a touching expression of his unhappy consciousness. Coleridge seems to invoke joy whole-heartedly in part IV of the poem. Joy is the "strong music in the soul" :

Joy, Edmund, is the spirit and the pow'r,  
 Which wedding nature to us gives in dow'r,  
 A new Earth and new Heaven  
 . . . . .  
 Joy is the sweet voice, joy the luminous cloud —  
 We, we ourselves rejoice !

But his invocation to joy loses its significance in the larger context of deep sadness that pervades the poem . The poet suffers from "a grief without a pang, void, dark and drear". It is an unimpassioned grief /Which finds no natural outlet, no relief / In word or sigh or tear-" (Coleridge, Poetical Works 575).

The dominating impression is that of the presence of deep anguish : "But now affliction bow me down to earth" (ibid 577).

Byron also demonstrates this agony of an alienated personality. The words which his hero Manfred utters seem to echo his creator :

My joys, my griefs, my passions and my  
Powers,  
Made me a stranger;

.....  
And with the thoughts of  
Men,

I held but slight communion; . . . .

("Manfred" act 2 scene 2: 54-56)

No less revealing is his prose observation :

.... But he who is outlawed by general opinion without the intervention of hostile politics, illegal judgement or circumstances, whether he be innocent or guilty must undergo all the bitterness of exile without hope, without pride, without alleviation. This case was mine<sup>1</sup>.

Byron did not have the wish to live : "who wants to live ? not I". For him, "Nothing is certain" and so he believes in "nothing" (qtd. in Romantic Cruxes 23).

Despair of an anguished existence marks Shelley's poetry too. "Ode to the West Wind" is undoubtedly an impassioned desire of an unhappy consciousness alienated from the world around :

Oh lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud !  
I fall upon the thorns of life ! I bleed !  
A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed  
One too like thee : tameless and swift and proud.

(The Selected Poetry and Prose of  
Percy Bysshe Shelley 392 )

"Alastor" according to many readers, is a poem of total despair. Shelley's hero leaves his alienated home to seek strange truths in "undiscovered land". Shelley also had a deep sense of failure in life. MacFarland quotes Shelley saying "Mine is a life of failures" (Romantic Cruxes 23). The brilliant celebration of romantic medievalism in "Christabel" or in "Kubla Khan" may be looked upon as the romantic poet's flight from an uncongenial reality to a strange world of dream and medievalism. Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and "Eve of St. Agnes" also are two of the finest examples of the romantic desire for medievalism as an escape route.

A sense of estrangement as discussed in our first chapter pervades Dickinson's personal life; it deeply informs her poetry too. In fact, her alienated consciousness is so pervasive a presence that it seems to be the distinguishing marker of her poetry. Whatever may be the source of this sense of isolation (misunderstanding by one and all, her religious unorthodoxy, or being a woman poet in a pre-dominantly male culture), she had no shelter against it except her language which she employed as a defence against her sense of estrangement.

Dickinson jokingly wrote to Susan Dickinson, her sister-in-law: "Subjects hinder talk" (Letters vol. ii: 512). Indeed, her best poems in their multiplicity of meaning, refuse to be confined to a single subject. However, most of her poems explore her alienated consciousness and its concomitant sense of anguish, pain and loneliness with such awful intensity that these become the primary focus or the subject of the poems in the conventional sense. In fact, she wrote brilliant poems out of this sense of estrangement. For instance, one notices the poet's desperate effort to portray her sense of terror at the vast abyss of loneliness. The Loneliness is like the shudder one feels at the mouth of a dark cavern or at the fear of death before a "Cannon's face":

Did you ever stand in a Cavern's Mouth-  
Widths out of the Sun-  
And look - and shudder, and block your breath-  
And deem to be alone (590)

The sense of horror continues and reaches its climax in the third stanza in which she imagines the terror of waiting before a "Cannon's face":

Did you ever look in a Cannon's face-  
 Between whose Yellow eye-  
 And yours - the Judgement intervened  
 The question of "To die"- (590)

The intimate tone, the poet's strategy for sharing the stark experience with the reader, enhances the horror of the situation. No less telling is no. 410 that describes the aftermath of profound psychic suffering. The first shock of dreadful agony is overcome and the poet feels delighted at her resilience :

The first Day's Night had come -  
 And grateful that a thing  
 So terrible - had been endured -  
 I told my Soul to sing - (410)

But the unbearable agony that follows almost destroys her sanity. It is the maddening pain of a sort from which she fails to recover:

And then - a Day as hugh  
 As Yesterdays in pairs,  
 Unrolled its horror in my face -  
 Until it blocked my eyes - (410)

Pain makes an "odd change" within the narrator and disintegrates the self.

"I felt a Cleaving in my Mind " (937) also demonstrates her incisive probing into the depth of a suffering psyche and its futile effort to survive the shock of acute pain :

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. (937)

Her effort to organize her thoughts results in futility. The brilliant image in the

two final lines makes a surprising combination of the strangely abstract with a homely image, testifying to her intense effort to articulate intangible psychic states :

The thought behind, I strove to join  
 Unto the thought before -  
 But Sequence unravelled out of Sound  
 Like Balls - upon a Floor.

"There's a certain Slant of light" (258) also remarkably renders a kind of existential despair through a web of images taken from nature. "Slant of light" in the "Winter Afternoons" oppresses the soul with a despair which nothing can alleviate. It is the "Seal Despair", a kind of "Heavenly Hurt" which is beyond " human correction" (Anderson 217).

It leaves no outward scar but changes the soul :

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us -  
 But internal difference,  
 We can find no scar,  
 Where the Meanings, are-

It is a superb lyric of despair written with stoic unsentimentality that heightens the pain of loss. The poem is justly considered one of her most memorable poems.

"I saw no Way . . ." (378) also strikes us with its stark poignancy turning our attention to the plight of a self estranged from both the earth and the heaven. "The Heavens were stiched" and the universe "slid" back. The poet is alone/ A speck upon a Ball -" (378).

These poems and many others like these achieve extraordinary poetic greatness through controlled intensity and successful distancing of personal emotions from art. Her alienated consciousness, and its accompanying despair and desolation articulated with stark psychological realism in her poems show hardly any parallel in any other Anglo-American romantic poets. In fact, despite

her romantic tendencies, she appears closer to the twentieth-century artists than to her nineteenth-century counterparts. Her preoccupation with how the self confronts loneliness, despair and dread of death brings to the mind Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard and Kafka rather than the romantic poets. Harold Bloom in The Western Canon (1995) pronounces : "Except for Kafka, I cannot think of any writer who has expressed desperation as powerfully as Dickinson" (295).

Subjectivity as a differentia characterizes Romantic poets in general. In Dickinson's poetry, however, subjectivity reaches its extreme limits. The world of her poetry finds its subject exclusively in the poet's private self. Wordsworth proclaimed in his prospectus to "The Excursion" : "The mind of man, my haunt, and the main region of my song" (Wordsworth : Poetical Works 590). But neither the external world nor "the mind of man" attracts Dickinson. Theatre of her own mind is the supreme concern of her poetry. She selects her own soul as her "society" and "shuts" the door to everything outside it. Since "Brain is wider than the Sky" and "deeper than the Sea", Dickinson found all her subjects, inspiration, her ecstasy, her joy, her despair, all within the world of her own mind. Herself is sufficient "for a Crowd" (789). Her mind is the "Undiscovered continent" Dickinson explores throughout her poetic career. External intoxicants are unnecessary for her : she needs no "Outer Wine" for poetic inspiration. For her, "Exhilaration is within" No other wine can "so royally intoxicate / As that diviner Brand/ the Soul achieves - Herself-" (383). Her poetic vision originates within herself rather than in the world outside. Commenting on this exclusive supremacy of the subjective world in Dickinson, Joseph Raab writes : "In Dickinson's recipe for a poem, the external world is an optional ingredient, while imagination is a sine qua non" (Emily Dickinson Handbook 282).

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee  
 One clover and a bee,  
 And revery.

The revery alone will do  
If bees are few. (1755)

Dickinson's poem on the spider also serves as a fitting symbol for her exclusive concern with her self. The spider is a symbol of complete self-sufficiency. It creates a beautiful white "Arc" out of its own self :

A Spider sewed at Night  
Without a light  
Upon an Arc of White. (1138)

The second stanza tells us that only the poet knows the nature of his/her art and thus subtly insists on the privacy of art :

If Ruff it was of Dame  
Or Shroud of Gnome  
Himself himself inform. (1138)

Dickinson, unappreciated and deprived of a receptive audience, identifies herself with the spider. In the privacy of her isolation, she creates like a spider a world of poetry inhabited by her self only. This poem also implicitly points to her kinship with the moderns in her emphasis on "physiognomy", that is, craftsmanship in art. The final lines assert that the immortality of the artist depends on the "Physiognomy" of his art :

Of Immortality  
His Strategy  
Was Physiognomy - (1138)

Showing close resemblance to Dickinson's conception of art, Keats also refers to the spider as a symbol of the self-sufficient poet in his letter to John Reynolds:

Now it appears to me that almost any man like the spider  
spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel-the points of  
leaves and twigs on which the spider begins her work are  
few . . . man should be content with as few points to tip with  
the fine webb of his Soul and weave a tapestry empyrean<sup>2</sup>.

Keats's spider, however, needs an external support- "the points of leaves and twigs". Outward world plays some part in the poetic world of the romantics as a point of departure for their subjective imagination. Imagination is supreme in Wordsworth too. Yet nature along with the mind of man forms the central source of his imagination. In Dickinson, however, her internal self spurs the creative urge. For her, her own self "is the indestructible Estate" and "Impregnable as light" (1351).

Albert Gelpi writes on this exclusive concern with subjectivity : "For Emily Dickinson ... all experience finally mattered only as it modified the self" (Emily Dickinson : Mind of the Poet 95). One of her best-known poems remarkably illustrates how external reality is subsumed by " prism of her consciousness" (620):

A route of Evanescence  
 With a revolving Wheel -  
 A Resonance of Emerald -  
 A Rush of Cochineal  
 And every blossom on the Bush  
 Adjusts its tumbled Head - (1463)

The object of the poem is mentioned nowhere. We learn, however, from one of her letters that the object described is a humming bird. The poet only narrates how the object appears on the consciousness in terms of abstract impressions of colour, sound, form and movement. Ronald Hegenbüchle argues that here we observe a sort of "phenomenological reduction". External occasion for the poem "recedes into the background and becomes dispensable or is even lost entirely" ("Precision and Indeterminacy in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson"; *ESQ.* vol. 20. 1974).

However, one interesting fact that emerges from a close reading of Dickinson's poems is the intensity of her dependence on her own self. The way she staked everything to keep the integrity of her soul far exceeds the romantic

and the transcendentalist conception of self and subjectivity. The poem cited below well-illustrates this fact :

My Soul accused me - And I quailed -

.....  
All else accused me - and I smiled -

My Soul - that Morning - was My friend -

For her, "Her favor-is the best Disdain/Toward Artifice of Time or Men" -.

But the "Disdain" of her soul is unbearable :

But her Disdain - 'twere lighter bear

A finger of Enamellad Fire - (753)

Karl Keller ascribes this intense subjectivity to Dickinson's innate puritanical demand for inwardness. Arguing on this point, Keller writes:

Emily Dickinson consistently considers woman in terms of a space within, marvelous hollows made by the puritan emphasis on internality, a space that made it spectacularly possible to think of herself in heroic, worthy and grace-filled ways. (Keller 37)

Puritanical ideology about the inner space of womanhood may have been one of the reasons. However, this almost hysteric need to make her consciousness her only means of survival perhaps arose from her absolute lack of any external prop of any kind to sustain her. She renounced fulfilment through marriage and motherhood ; she lacked traditional religious faith or belief in a sustaining nature. More significantly, she felt herself unable to experience a sense of identity with the patriarchal literary tradition. All these deprivations led her to turn to her own self exclusively for sustenance. However, this intense exploration of the self turns her into a realist of a different kind. Drama of the self she enacts in poem after poem, often with disturbing accuracy, is hardly romantic.

Dickinson's vision of nature conspicuously points to her deviation from the Anglo-American Romantic nature poetry. Nature provided a kind of spiritual

shelter and regenerative support to the romantic poets in general. Nature was a source of poetic inspiration and often an alternative religion. Romantic radicals were particularly hostile to the religion of the Churches as religion was used to "justify ruthlessness and inequality and privilege in the society" (Rodway 29). Contemplation of nature helped them to alleviate their outsider feeling, providing a sort of spiritual strength in the hour of need. So Wordsworth writes about nature in the "Influence of Natural Objects" as the "wisdom and spirit" of the universe. Nature gives a "grandeur in the beating of the heart" (Wordsworth, Poetical works 70). In "Tintern Abbey" (1798) Wordsworth recognizes in nature

The anchor of my purest thoughts,  
The nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart and  
Soul  
Of all my moral being.      (Poetical Works 165)

To Wordsworth, "Nature never did betray the heart that loves her("Tintern Abbey"). From this conviction springs the role of nature as consoler in "The Prelude" :

No out cast is he, bewildered and depressed :  
Along his infant veins are interfused  
The gravitation and the filial bond  
Of nature that connects him with the world.

(Poetical Works 505)

Wordsworth also firmly believes that nature plays a central role in the growth and development of the poet's mind when the "discerning intellect" is "Wedded to the goodly universe in love and holy passion" (Poetical Works 590).

For him, the union of the external world and human mind is regenerative and will "accomplish" "creation". Coleridge also in the same vein declares in his conversational poem "This Lime Tree Bower My Prison"(1797) that "nature ne'er deserts the wise and poor" (Coleridge, Poetical Works 181). Keats, however, had his moments of doubt and uncertainty about the supposed beneficial and

consolatory aspects of nature. "Epistle to Reynolds" articulates his awareness of nature's indifference to pains of destruction and death :

... I saw  
 Too far into the sea, where every maw  
 The greater on the less feeds ever more -  
 But I saw too distinct into the core  
 Of an eternal fierce destruction . . .  
 The Shark at savage prey-the hawk at pounce  
 The gentle Robin, like a Pard or Ounce,  
 Ravening a worm . . .<sup>3</sup>

Disturbing vision of the threat within nature often destroys Keats's desire to find nature both humane and beneficial. Ultimately, however, Keats reconciles this ruthless aspects of nature with a feeling that natural life is good and worthwhile. Joanne ~~Fait Dieh~~ cites Keats's sonnet "On the Grasshopper and Cricket" as a poem on the "restorative powers of nature" (Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination 97). Written in winter, the poem celebrates the cycle of renewal and conveys "reassurance" (~~Dieh~~ 97). Shelley also some times find nature "Remote", "serene" and "inaccessible", a power that "dwells apart" (The Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley 372). Yet nature is a source of inspiration and rejuvenation. "Ode to the West Wind", his best known lyric, is a sustained invocation to the west wind for inspiration and resurrection :

... Be thou, spirit fierce  
 My spirit, Be thou me, impetuous one !  
 . . . . .  
 Be through my lips to unawakened earth  
 . . . . .  
 The trumpet of a prophecy ! (Lines 61-70)

Even Byron, who was far more a sceptic than the other romantic poets and the least mystical, often sought solace in the spirit of nature. His Manfred speaks of

his communion with nature :

My joy was in the wilderness - to breathe  
The difficult air of iced mountain's top.

("Manfred", Act 2, Sc 11, Lines 63-64)

Though a stranger with little connection with others, Byron made his eyes "familiar with eternity" (qtd. in Rodway 208).

However, this romantic celebration of nature is hardly present in Dickinson's poetry. She never spiritualises nature : she had no pantheistic or transcendental beliefs in nature or in its spiritual or consolatory impact upon man. Readers never feel in her poems any Wordsworthian sense of reciprocity between individual mind and external nature. Barring occasional sentimental pieces in the pervasive contemporary cult, Dickinson's nature poems manifest a freshness, an originality of perception. In Anderson's words, her poems are free from ideas about "nature as divine analogy, as healer and moral teacher, as the garment that veils indwelling spirit" (Anderson 96). Since she was well-acquainted with the English romantic poets, thematic affinities between her poems and those of the romantics are often noticed. For instance, her famous poem "Further in Summer than the Birds" (1068) echoes Keats's sonnet "On the Grasshopper and the Cricket". However, the difference in treatment points to Dickinson's refutation of the consolatory perspective in Keats's poem. In Keats's poem, the cricket sings of the cycle of renewal in nature, and conveys the assurance that "poetry of earth is never dead". In Dickinson's poem, the cricket's voice is a pensive sound : it is a voice of loss that reminds one of the death of summer. The crickets celebrate the mass over the dying day:

Further in Summer than the Birds  
Pathetic from the Grass  
A minor Nation celebrates  
It's unobtrusive Mass.      (1068)

While in Keats, the grasshopper takes the "lead/In Summer luxury" and the only

weariness results from "fun". Voice of Dickinson's cricket symbolises loss and fills the landscape with loneliness :

No Ordinance be seen  
 So gradual the Grace  
 A pensive Custom it becomes  
 Enlarging Loneliness. (1068)

Commenting on this poem, Winter writes :

. . . the subject is the plight of man . . . in a universe in which he is by virtue of his essential qualities a foreigner. The intense nostalgia of the poem is the nostalgia of man for the mode of being which he perceives imperfectly and in which he cannot share. (In Defense of Reason 292)

Dickinson's estrangement from the romantic poets' perception of a beneficial and consolatory nature seems all the more acute if we study Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" with Dickinson's poem "The Frost was never seen" (1210). The profound difference in treatment despite some similarities of images and phrases, again points to her divergence from the romantic perspective on nature — a divergence that can be defined as epistemological. Coleridge's poem presents a vision of the reciprocal relationship between the natural world and the human imagination. In Coleridge, frost is a productive natural force : "The Frost performs its secret ministries/unhelped by any wind". The poet's imagination, fired by the calm midnight scene, dreams of a happy future fulfilment.

In Dickinson, however, in sharp contrast to Coleridge, frost is like a hostile, unseen stranger who raises fear and alarm :

The frost was never seen –  
 If met, too rapid passed,  
 Or in too unsubstantial Team – (1202)

It is like "A Stranger hovering round/A Symptom of alarm/ In Villages remotely set/ But search effaces him". Unlike in Coleridge, the atmosphere of the poem

is charged with an air of destruction and death. The last two stanzas of the poem brood over the human predicament and reveal a sort of existential despair:

Unproved is much we know -  
 Unknown the worst we fear -  
 Of Strangers is the Earth the Inn  
 Of secrets is the Air - (1202)

The last stanza shows the poet exhausted and defeated. She does not have the power to analyse or comprehend this enigmatic nature :

To analyze perhaps  
 A Philip would prefer  
 But Labor vaster than myself  
 I find it to infer. (1202)

Joanne ~~Feit~~ ~~Diehl~~ justly observes that here Dickinson reveals a "psychological state" that remains farthest from "Coleridge's reassuring affirmation of the beneficent power of the universe" (Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination 53).

"A little Madness in the Spring" (1333) also testifies to her nonspiritual and non didactic vision of nature. The manuscript version of the poem shows that Dickinson chose the expression "Experiment of Green" over the alternative expression "Apocalypse of Green" employed in the rough draft of the poem. Her preference for a more neutral and realistic word "experiment" over "Apocalypse", a word with distinct religious overtone, points to her conscious rejection of the religious view of nature. Unlike the romantics and the transcendentalists, Dickinson primarily portrays nature as an objective spectacle rendering its details with wonderful artistry. Her poems on sunset, for instance, are particularly remarkable for their vivid descriptions without any spiritual or religious overtone. Sunset reminds the poet of a wild leopard leaping to the sky:

Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple

Leaping like leopards to the Sky  
 Then at the feet of the old Horizon  
 Laying her spotted Face to die. . . (228)

The images of fire, gold and rich colour fused together make a magnificent portrait. Here is another sunset rendered with strict economy :

Where ships of Purple – gently toss --  
 On seas of Daffodil –  
 Fantastic sailors – mingle –  
 And then the Wharf is still ! (265)

No less dazzling is the spectacle of sunset in 291 :

How the old Mountains drip with Sunset  
 How the Hemlocks burn –  
 How the Dun Brake is draped in Cinder  
 By the wizard Sun —

The third stanza offers a remarkable picture of the gradually fading sunlight:

Then how the Fire ebbs like Billows --  
 Touching all the Grass  
 with a departing -- Sapphire -- feature  
 As a Duchess passed --

Another startling poem on sunset emphasizes the colour red with descriptive violence :

Whole Gulfs – of Red and Fleets –  
 And Crews – of solid Blood –  
 Did place about the West – Tonight  
 As'twere specific Ground – (658)

Sometimes her domestic experiences inform her description of sunset :

She sweeps with many coloured Brooms –  
 And leaves the Shreds behind –  
 Oh housewife in the Evening West

Come back and dust the Pond ! (219)

Poem No 716 also employs domestic imagery in describing Sunset. Sunset is the undressing of the day portrayed as woman :

The Day undressed – Herself –  
 Her Garter – was of Gold –  
 Her Petticoat – of Purple plain  
 Her Dimities – as old –

Resultant impression is a fresh and authentic point of view of a woman poet exploring new ways free from convention. In another, sunset lends a peculiar pathos to the departing day :

Fairer through Fading – as the Day  
 Into the Darkness dips away –  
 Half Her Complexion of the Sun –  
 Hindering – Haunting – Perishing – (938)

The analogy in the next stanza with its subtle emphasis on flux and mutability is indeed a fact of rare artistry. Fading glow of the day – "Hindering – Haunting – Perishing" – is like the "expiring – perfect – look" of a dying friend – a look that only "aggravate the Dark" (938). None of these poems convey any spiritual or transcendental romantic perception of nature. In fact, very rarely Dickinson thinks of a spiritual or mystical influence of nature. At best she can perceive some affirmative influence of nature on the poet's soul:

A something in a summer's Day  
 As slow her flambeaux burn away  
 Which solemnizes me.  
 A something in a summer's noon –  
 A depth – An Azure – a perfume –  
 Transcending ecstasy. (122)

But here also the nature of the impact is noticeably vague. It is not a sense of joy but something that transcends "ecstasy". Some of her best poems, however,

characteristically find in natural landscape a sense of vague terror and pain. A "certain slant of light" in the "winter afternoons" oppresses us like the "Heft of Cathedral Tunes" (258). Nature, Dickinson feels, gives us "Heavenly Hurt" and becomes symbolic of the malvolent God who sends us through air "imperial affliction". So goes the second stanza :

None may teach it – Any –  
Tis the Seal despair  
An imperial affliction  
Sent us of the Air. (258)

Dickinson also markedly differs from the romantic and the transcendentalist poets in her insistence on the ungraspable mystery of nature. To her, the secrets of nature are beyond human comprehension. Nature in her poems remains ultimately unknowable despite human effort to interpret her message. In her perception, nature, like God, defies all attempts to master her secrets : "Nature and God — I neither knew" (835). This unhesitating declaration runs counter to the romantic and transcendentalist certainty in the transparency and knowability of nature. Wordsworth confidently hears "still sad music of humanity" or reads spiritual message into natural landscape. Emerson assumes nature to be fully decipherable. His essay "Nature" reflects his conviction that nature symbolises unchanging human truths which the poet conveys in his writing : "The world is emblematic, Parts of speech are metaphors because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind". (Portable Emerson 23-24). Emerson also emphasizes poet's role as an interpreter of nature. His poem "Apology" describes nature as "words", "letter", "thoughts" and "history" that the poet gathers in a "song". He goes to the "wood" to "fetch his word to men" and deciphers the "letter" that the floating clouds "write". "Every astor" in his "hand goes home loaded with a thought". Emerson is fully confident of the certainty and transparency of nature. For Emerson, nature is no mystery. Flowers and birds reveal to him the mystery of nature :

There was never mystery  
 But 'tis figured in the flowers  
 was never secret mystery  
 But birds tell it in the bowers.

("The Apology", Selected Prose & Poetry 456)

Dickinson's nature poetry fully undermines these assumptions and emphasizes the impenetrable mystery of nature. Often in her poems, as in 668, she negates consistently all conventional definitions of nature. The first three lines define nature in terms of sense impressions :

"Nature" is what we see —  
 The Hill — the Afternoon —  
 Squirrel — Eclipse — the Bumble bee —

Next line rejects these definitions and interprets nature in spiritual terms:

Nay, Nature is Heaven —

Again follows her effort to master the secrets of elusive nature in the next three lines in terms of hearing :

Nature is what we hear —  
 The Bobolink — the Sea —  
 Thunder — the Cricket.

Next line, however, brings a contradictory view :

Nay, Nature is Harmony —

Words like "Heaven" and "Harmony" seem to indicate something deeper beyond mere objective reality. But the final stanza shatters the entire previous structure of conventional certainty about nature and categorically declares man's obtuseness vis-a-vis the mysterious significance of nature :

Nature is what we know —  
 Yet have no art to say —  
 So impotent Our wisdom is

To her Simplicity.

Our knowledge proves to be entirely useless before the inscrutability of nature in spite of its apparent "Simplicity". So she argues, nature is "What we know but yet no art to say".

"The tint I cannot take" (627), another well-known poem, also seems to suggest that the external spectacle of nature only hides some mysterious secret and provides only momentary ecstasy :

The fine – impalpable Array –  
 That swaggars on the eye  
 Like Cleopatra's Company –  
 Repeated in the sky  
 . . . . .  
 The eager look-on Landscapes –  
 As if they had just repressed  
 Some Secret – that was pushing  
 Like Chariots — in the Vest --

But the ecstasy one feels at these exquisite beauties of nature is only momentary and is ultimately frustrating as their essential truth remains "graspless" and "mocks" human understanding :

Their Graspless manners -- mock us --  
 Until the Cheated Eye  
 Shuts arrogantly -- in the Grave --  
 Another way - to see --

In a slightly satirical vein, poem no. 1333 — "A Little Madness in the Spring" – – makes fun of the naivety which assumes an easy understanding of the true reality of nature. The sense of ecstatic delight one feels at the beauty of the Spring is no doubt "wholesome" :

A little madness in the Spring

Is wholesome even for the King.

But with a dig at the romantic and transcendentalist confidence in a transparent nature, she declares in the next lines that a person who tries to own nature is nothing short of a fool, for nature is a "miracle beyond mortal powers", (Anderson 81) :

But God be with the clown –  
 Who ponders this tremendous scene –  
 This whole Experiment of Green –  
 As if it were his own !

This doubt revealing her divergence from the romantic poets in general dominates most of her nature poems. External features of nature, "the outside", are only "tents to Nature's show" that are mistakenly taken as inner truth:

We spy the Forests and the Hills  
 The Tents to Nature's Show  
 Mistake the Outside for the in  
 And mention what we saw.

In her view, man is nothing but a commentator on the outside attraction of nature :

Could commentators on the Sign  
 Of nature's Caravan  
 Obtain "Admission" as a Child  
 Some wednesday – Afternoon – (1097)

Man must remain satisfied with the external spectacle like a child seeking admission inside the colourful vans of travelling circuses. Here she clearly negates the Wordsworthian doctrine that man can achieve union with the informing spirit of nature.

Another poem (1170) tells us her belief that the human way of representing nature misses her more complex and wilder aspects. Viewed from customary perspective, "nature affects to be sedate". "But let our observation shut", Nature

practices "Neocramancy" and "the Trades/Remote to understand". Nature, "the spacious Citizen" to human understanding, turns into a "Juggler" who unsettles all conventional assumptions about her. "What mystery pervades a well" (1400), another very remarkable poem of the Dickinson canon, also superbly portrays the mysterious strangeness of nature. The very first line begins with a sense of wonder :

"What mystery pervades a well !"

The well is a symbol of the strange and unfamiliar nature :

That water lives so far —

A neighbour from another world

Residing in a jar.

Whose limits none have ever seen, . . . .

The water is so near, yet "so far" from man's comprehension! It is contained in a jar, yet a fluid that eludes her grasp. To the poet, looking into the well is like looking in "an abyss's face!". Nature is "haunted house" — familiar, yet possessed by mysterious forces that negate all our certitude about her. The final stanza states her belief with subtle irony that nature eludes appropriation by human beings however much they try to assume mastery over her mysterious domain:

To pity those that know her not

Is helped by the regret

That those who know her, know her less

The nearer her they get.

"Four Trees-upon a solitary Acre" (742), a less-known poem, also objectifies Dickinson's sense of the inscrutability of nature. It is a remarkable poem displaying her stylistic originality at its extreme. The first two stanzas describe four trees solitary upon an "Acre" without any apparent order or objective :

Four Trees – upon a solitary Acre

Without Design

Or Order, or Apparent Action –

Maintain –  
 The Sun upon a Morning meets them –  
 The Wind –  
 No nearer Neighbour – have they –  
 But God – (742)

Nothing is certain about them except the interdependence of the Acre and the Trees. Even this interdependence is stated with a note of indeterminacy as the language use indicates. The very style of the poem with its broken abrupt phrases and confusing dashes functions as a medium of her sense of uncertainty about any fixed meaning. The last stanza finally declares with a kind of stoic certainty the unknowability of nature:

What deed is Theirs unto the General Nature –  
 What Plan  
 They severally – retard – or further –  
 Unknown --

The single word "Unknown" in the final line strikes the mind with a peculiar effectiveness. Stressing this point, David Porter writes that the "order" of the poem "leads skillfully, inexorably, it seems, into the absolute ignorance of the final line" (Modern Idiom 163).

Another significant feature of Dickinson's nature poetry that differentiates her from the English and the American romantic poetry is her acute and often painful sense of the separation between man and nature. Nature's indifference to human plight is the theme of a number of her poems. For instance, "I dreaded the first Robin, so" (348) tellingly brings out the threatening indifference of nature to human suffering. To the poet, spring with its lavishness is almost a nightmarish dread. The sounds of spring would "mangle" her. Yellow daffodils would only pierce her :

I dared not meet the Daffodils –

For fear their Yellow Gown  
 Would pierce me with a fashion  
 So foreign to my own –

The poet even wishes the "bees to stay away". They do not care for her : "what word had they, for me?". Blossoms of spring never stay away in gentle deference to human suffering :

No Blossom stayed away  
 In gentle deference to me –  
 The Queen of Calvary –

The final stanza of the poem shows how she thinks that any outward expression of terror and grief in the face of nature's indifference is fruitless, almost childish. life of nature goes on almost unthinking:

Each one salutes me, as he goes,  
 And I, my childish Plumes,  
 Lift, in bereaved acknowledgement  
 of their unthinking Drums –

Here is another explicit example of her idea about nature's indifference to human sensibility :

The Morning after Woe –  
 'Tis frequently the – Way –  
 Surpasses all that rose before –  
 For utter Jubilee – (364)

The indifferent nature "piled her Blossoms on / And further to parade a Joy / Her Victim stared upon-" (364). Dickinson's poem on the moon also shows hardly any romantic enthusiasm for nature. The moon is like a guillotined head or a "Stemless Flower". The shockingly unromantic images startle us out of our conventional ideas about the moon. The poem then emphasizes her remoteness from man. The moon has no concern for "little mysteries" that harass us like the Mysteries of "Life – Death– and Afterwards" (629). She only shines in the sky,

"independent – and engrossed to Absolute". The final stanza adumbrates in a subtle manner man's alienation from nature :

And next I met her on a Cloud –  
 Myself too far below  
 To follow her superior Road –  
 Or its advantage – Blue –

Thus romanticism in her poems is of a different kind and co-exists with stark realities. Even the dark and alien aspects of nature do not escape her keen observation. So we notice in no. 986 how the snake brings out chilly apprehension and dread, revealing destructive aspects of nature :

A narrow Fellow in the Grass  
 Occasionally rides –  
 You may have met Him – did you not  
 His notice sudden is –

The poet feels a "transport of cordiality" for "several of Nature's People". But the snake evokes a sense of dread :

But never met this Fellow  
 Attended, or alone  
 Without a tighter breathing  
 And Zero at the Bone.

The ferocity of nature is also vividly expressed in "The wind began to knead the Grass" (824). Stormy wind rocks the grass, menaces the earth and the sky and plucks leaves from the grass; dust storm "scoops itself like Hands/And throw away the Road". The lightning "showed a Yellow Head/And then a livid Toe". And when "One drop of Giant Rain" comes, it appears, as if, "the Hands/That held the Dams — had parted hold-" and "the Waters Wrecked the Sky".

If these poems present nature as malevolent pretty explicitly, there are others which do it cryptically. For instance, "I started Early – took my dog"(520) apparently conforms to the convention of the romantic celebration of childhood:

I started Early –Took my Dog  
 And visited the Sea –  
 The Mermaids in the Basement  
 Come out to look at me –

But the next stanzas shatter the simplicity of the earlier lines through a personification of the sea as uncaring and destructive. From the third stanza onwards follows a picture of the rushing, mindless water that seems to attack the innocent girl as a cruel "he" :

But no Man moved Me – till the Tide  
 Went past my simple Shoe –  
 And past my Apron — and my Belt  
 And past my Bodice too –

The sea would "eat" her "up" "as wholly as a Dew/upon a Dandelion's Sleeve-". This image of the sea as a savage male seems to underscore the destructive aspect of nature. This awareness of both the beautiful and the awful aspects of nature demonstrates her distinctiveness as a nature poet. It sharply marks her out from the romantic poets with their conception of a compassionate and benevolent nature.

Undoubtedly, the primary reason for her significant divergence from the Anglo-American romantic tradition lies in her intense individuality. She perceives nature in her own way uninfluenced by authority and tradition. So despite her romantic sensibilities, her nature poems turn out to be highly original.

It is however interesting to note in this context how feminist scholars respond to Dickinson's understanding of nature. Feminist scholars like Rachel Stein and Margaret Homans attribute her differing vision of nature to her being a powerful woman poet embedded in an exclusively male tradition. In their view, she was keenly alive to the fact that the prevalent literary conventions and poetic ethos were all dictated by the male poet's necessity and inclination. Arguing on this point, Joanne Feit Diehl writes : "By conceiving of herself as

necessarily apart from this male line of poets, Dickinson creates a space, a crucial discontinuity, that provides her the freedom to experiment" (Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination 7). Dickinson also visualizes nature as woman as male romantic poets do. However, as she tries to articulate her own feminine perception, she presents nature not always as mother nature sanctified by Wordsworthian tradition. Margaret Homans argues that Dickinson rejects this concept of mother nature as she regards this concept as cultivated by romantic tradition. Figure of mother nature, to her, is not an actual reality but something "extrinsic to nature" (Homans 200). Since Dickinson recognizes this figure of feminized nature as "a figure imported from tradition" (Homans 200), she is able to free herself from this confining tradition and refashions feminized nature as "omnipotent", mysterious and "self-possessed" female power rather than as subservient to the will of masculine poets (Stein 30). In Dickinson's poems, Stein argues, nature is not subjected to human use and possesses a separate identity unlike in Romantic and transcendentalist poetry where "woman and nature exist only as objects of the poet's vision" (Stein 27). Dickinson's insistence on the graspless mystery of nature, thus, according to the feminists, demonstrates her resistance to appropriate nature in the Wordsworthian - Emersonian fashion. As a woman poet, she portrays nature as woman differently, and thereby subtly challenges the conventional assumption about female subordination, inferiority and powerlessness.

Rachel Stein also argues for a different kind of reading of some of Dickinson's nature poems which are generally regarded as sentimental nature poetry in the contemporary fashion. For instance, "nature – the Gentlest Mother is" (790) portrays nature as a caring mother figure :

Nature-the Gentlest Mother is  
 Impatient of no Child –  
 The feeblest or the waywardest –

Her Admonition mild –

Nature guards her children, as the poet tells us, with "infinite affection/And infiniter care". The poem seems to establish, Stein reasons, maternal care as the principle of nature. This "beneficent maternal image" implicitly questions our acceptance of a grim and distant God. So these poems stand in ironic contrast to Dickinson's poems on God, the father.

From the feminist perspective then, Dickinson, in coping with her situation as an outsider in the dominant tradition, emerges as a very individual poet whose poetic vision transcends the romantic tradition of the nineteenth century and creates a refreshingly original poetry informed by her feminine perspective.

Moreover, her objective, amoral and nonspiritual vision of nature significantly impacts twentieth-century poets like Robert Frost. Frost, for whom "Emily Dickinson was the best of all women poets who ever wrote" (qtd. in Keller 309), shows a Dickinson like scepticism about the ideas of wholeness or fulfilment in nature. To him also, nature's design is often the design of darkness to "appal" as in the poem "Design". Like Dickinson, he also keenly feels the strangeness of nature. In his poem "For Once, then Something" he fails to read the meaning of nature in the image beneath the water looking down a well. The meaning remains obscure. Frost "sees Something more of the depth – and then I lost it":

One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple  
 Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,  
 Blurred it, blotted it out; what was that whiteness ?  
 Truth ? a pebble of quartz ? For once, then something.

Similarity with Dickinson's "What mystery pervades a well !" (1400) is indeed striking.

Finally, it may not be inappropriate to remark that despite her romantic sensibilities, Dickinson is a poet whose romanticism orientates towards modernism. One may also say that her poetic oeuvre evokes so many possibilities and perspectives that she eludes any definite category. She is so inclusive that

it is inappropriate to call her an "either or poet". Rather, she is a "both / and" poet who tries to achieve plural perspectives that seem closer to her sense of reality than a singular, unitary vision. (Emily Dickinson Hand Book 293). As readers, we are finally left with "a sense of humility, admiration and wonder" when we reflect on the unlimited possibilities of her "stupendous oeuvre" (Handbook 382).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Some observations upon an article in Blackwood's magazine no. 39, August 1815 in letters and Journals (1898/1900). Ed. Prothero, Vol. 4, 478 (cited in Romantic Cruxes 30).

<sup>2</sup>John Keats, The Letters of John Keats. Letter no. 62, 1.231-132. 19 February 1818 to J.H. Reynolds.

<sup>3</sup>Keats, Poems. " To J.H. Reynolds Esq.", 93-105.