

CONCLUSION

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The preceding chapters of my study have examined Dickinson's estranged consciousness from various perspectives. In this concluding chapter, I shall make a brief analysis of Dickinson's sense of alienation in the light of some philosophical theories of alienation in order to highlight her distinctiveness as a poet.

Alienation is generally considered a distinctively modern phenomenon. Concept of alienation has played a considerable role in the discussion of modern art, literature, and philosophy. Especially, it has a significant role in the philosophical thinking of modern times. However, alienation or the feeling of being an outsider can be found also in the past philosophers and poets though in the modern ages it is much more extreme. The secular concept of alienation can be traced back to Hegel, who used the term "alienation" in his Phenomenology of Spirit (1870). Simply speaking, Hegel thought that the human world, in all its manifestations such as social, political and cultural, is largely a creation of man. So this "social substance," as Hegel called it, is an actualisation or objectification of the human spirit. Hegel insisted that individuality is only one aspect of human nature, universality being the other equally important aspect" (qtd. in Schacht 33). A balanced characterization of man's nature, according to Hegel, includes the ideas of both individuality and universality. "Spirit is the nature of the human beings generally and their nature is therefore twofold; at one extreme explicit individuality of consciousness and will and at the other universality which knows and wills what is substantive" (qtd. Schacht 33). Attaching great importance to universality, Hegel identifies universality with "social substance" in Phenomenology. He considers unity with the social substance to be something essential for man. "It is in an ethical [i.e social] order that individuals are actually in possession of their own inner universality" (qtd.in Schacht 35). Alienation occurs, as Hegel understood it, when an individual loses unity or

ceases to identify with the social substance. Such an individual loses his universality and in fact his essence. He thus alienates himself from his inner nature or becomes self-alienated. These ideas about alienation can be found in Rousseau also. Rousseau too insisted on the unity of the individual self with the social or universal as advocated in his Social Contract theory. However, Hegel's views were conditioned by historical necessities of the time when romantic cult of the individual and inwardness was gaining ascendancy at the expense of involvement in social affairs and traditions. Thus Hegel's views on self-alienation should be regarded as an attempt to curb the excesses of romanticism and therefore his concept of self-alienation does not possess universal significance.

From the Hegelian perspective, Dickinson appears to be an alienated personality since she lived an almost exclusively withdrawn existence away from society in general. Socio-cultural estrangement facilitated her self-realisation through her poetic vocation. Her contemporary women poets accepted socially imposed feminine values and often surrendered their true selves to gain access to male-dominated literary world. Uninhibited exploration of their personal selves was a taboo for women artists who wished fame and recognition in a patriarchal society. Dickinson was, in many ways, an outsider to her contemporary society. That is why she could be so strikingly authentic.

Borrowing from Hegel, Karl Marx also used the term alienation extensively in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts published in 1832. Marx's criticism of contemporary society and his characterization of contemporary man analyse the term alienation from a secular and material perspective. Marx suggests that man "fulfills himself" and "develops his spiritual and physical energies" through his labour (qtd Schacht 79). For Marx, man's labour should be "free", "his own spontaneous activity" (qtd.in Schacht 79). In Marx's opinion, then, one whose labour is alienated from him does not "fulfill himself in his work but denies himself" (qtd. in Schacht 90). When a person's work is compelled rather than

spontaneous and self-directed, he or she is unable to realize his/her "species being" in work; the essence of a person remains unrealized. Such a person is fated to suffer from a feeling of misery rather than of well-being and is self-alienated.

Dickinson never allowed her creative work to be other-directed. In writing poetry, she never compromised with conventional literary judgement. Her verse is the manifestation of her authentic self. She had to renounce chances of publication and fame for her defiance of tradition. But her renunciation allowed her to keep herself intellectually and creatively independent. Unlike many of her contemporary sisters, whose lives were belted by an all powerful "he", Dickinson prevented the surrender of her self to others and retained her inner self at the cost of social and cultural estrangement. Her life, unlike those of her contemporary women, was not determined by her relation to society.

It may be reasoned that Dickinson's self-chosen alienation facilitated her 'authentic existence', to use a Heideggerean term employed in connection with Heidegger's discussions of alienation in his famous work Being and Time (1927). German existentialist Martin Heidegger used the term alienation to refer to the state of unrealized selfhood. Heidegger differentiates between two basic ways of living, one of which he terms 'authentic existence' and the other 'inauthentic'. (qtd. in Schacht 200). For him, "authentic existence" is self determined existence, shaped and given direction by an individual's own choices. "Inauthentic existence" is a life determined by social expectations and conventions, thus lacking in self-directeness. Alienation occurs when there is a disparity between a person's essential nature and his actual condition. According to Heidegger, then, a man is alienated when he fails to direct his life in terms of his authentic self, and consequently such a man is estranged from his "own-most potentiality for being"(qtd. in Schacht, 201) or self alienated.

Heidegger relates man's attitude to death also with the ideas of authentic

and inauthentic existence and with his notion of alienation. Since death, according to Heidegger, is one of the "possibilities of being" for an individual, the full recognition or awareness of death is an extremely necessary condition of authentic human existence. However, he observes that people are apt to forget that they themselves must die, and think about death impersonally. This absence of the personal awareness of death leads to inauthentic existence and contributes to man's alienation from his or her "own most potentiality for being". Dickinson is not self-alienated from this existential perspective. Her estrangement was partly a sense of isolation from others. But she was true to her "own most potentiality for being" (Qtd. in Sachacht 201). Her life, as we have seen, is not other-directed. Her outward alienation was a way, though hard and desolate, for realizing her "authentic existence" in terms of her own will and desire. Secondly, a profound awareness of death informs her consciousness, and her verse manifests her ceaseless exploration of death from multi-dimensional perspectives. She tries to cope with this fundamental fact of human existence without any sentimental or religious consolation concealing the reality of death. Life and death co-exist in her consciousness and in her poetry.

However, this existential dimension apart, Dickinson's sense of estrangement had a profound metaphysical character too. Having its origin in her lack of a stable religious faith also, it fostered an agonized sense of separation not only from God but from nature and the universe also. We can define this aspect of her alienated consciousness in the words of Karl Jasper :

The world as object of knowledge is (something) alien. I stand at a distance from it ... To me it is the other. I am a matter of indifference to it.... I do not feel secure in it, for it does not speak the language of something related to me. The more decisively I grasp it cognizingly, the more homeless I feel in the world--which as the other, ... is desolate. (qtd. in Schacht 198)

The passage quoted below from Camus' Myth of Sisyphus also reminds one of Dickinson's alienated consciousness:

.... one step further--and alienness confronts us : the perception that the world is "dense", the realization of how very alien a stone is, how impenetrable it is for us, and of the intensity with which nature or a landscape denies us. In the depths of every beauty there lies something inhuman.. [which renders it] more remote from us than a lost paradise. (qtd. in Sachacht 199)

Dozens of Dickinson poems can be cited to show how she articulates nearly the same sentiments through her verse. She tells us in no 835 that "Nature and God I neither knew," and how all our wisdom becomes "impotent" before nature's deceptive "simplicity". The "Light" that "exists in spring waits upon the lawn". "It almost speaks" to us (812). But the fourth stanza lays bare the alienation of man from the universe :

Then as Horizons step
Or Noons report away
Without the Formula of sound
It passes and we stay- (812)

And this disappearance of light creates a "quality of loss / Affecting our content" (812). This melancholy sense of the isolated character of man's existence manifests itself in a telling manner in another :

I saw no Way — The Heavens were stiched
.....
I touched the Universe —
And back it slid - and I alone —
A Speck upon a Ball —

Went out upon Circumference —
 Beyond the Dip of Bell — (378)

The causes of her sense of estrangement are indeed diverse ranging from the sociological psychological to the philosophical-existential. However, it seems that the fundamental cause of alienation lies in a person's sense of individuality which accounts for his or her characteristic approach to various aspects of experience. Dickinson's intense individuality led her to explore critically existing norms and certainties of life. Poem after poem shows this fierce sense of self, and the determination to follow her own will. This insistence on aggressive individual freedom shows itself in her desire to have indisputable "right to perish". It also manifests itself in her bitter realization that "attempt it and the universe / upon the opposite/ will concentrate its officers —" (1692). The violent anger at the interference in one's choice by society marks the final lines of the poem :

You cannot even die
 But nature and mankind must pause
 To pay you scrutiny.

Interestingly enough, this uncompromising demand for free will and autonomy reminds one of Dostoyevsky's angry demand for the exercise of one's own free-will articulated through the monologue of his anti hero in "Notes from Underground". Dostoyevsky's hero, a profoundly alienated individual, protests bitterly against the uniformity of action and social behaviour demanded by our societies. He desires individual freedom of action almost in the manner of this angry Dickinsonian persona. His nameless character says... :

... one's own free and unfettered volition, one's own caprice,
 however wild, one's own fancy, inflamed sometimes to the point of
 madness--that is the one best and greatest good, which is never

taken into consideration because it will not fit into any classification, and the omission of which always sends all system and theories to the devil ... what a man needs is simply and solely independent volition, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead. (Notes from Underground 34)

Dickinson's originality and alienated consciousness show hardly any parallel in her contemporary literary scene. The nature of her poetic consciousness, now indisputably recognised as the modern consciousness, marks her distinctiveness from her contemporaries. Ann Bradstreet, the only important American woman poet before her, shows no estrangement of spirit. Bradstreet had been without much difficulty a poet, puritan, wife and mother. Even Emerson and Whitman, for all their rebellious originality, were part of their contemporary society.

In an age when domestic duties and altruistic purposes were considered primary duties of a woman, Dickinson, with her passionate concern for individuality, had very little chance of being understood. Thus her expression of quiet sorrow that "no body knows" that "you got a Brook in your little heart,/ where bashful flowers blow,/ And blushing birds go down to drink" / And shadows tremble so—" (136). The following lines also seem like a veiled warning that behind the quiet "volcano" lies the firerocks :

How red the Fire rocks below —
 How insecure the sod
 Did I disclose
 Would populate with awe my solitude. (1677)

Through her correspondence with Higginson about the possibility of the publication of her verse, Dickinson understood that her verse would be denied the status of poetry by the contemporary literary scene for her supposed stylisticeccentricity, concern for personal freedom and lack of conventional inhibition. So she withdrew herself exclusively from the outside world and devoted

herself to her own kind of poetry against a tradition that denied her the recognition of a poet. Henry Barbusse in his novel L' Enfer defines an outsider as one "who becomes alive to certain questions" and "who sees too deep and too much" (qtd. in Wilson 9). Dickinson fits in well with this definition. Indeed, she was restlessly "alive" to the problems of life, death and immortality, and was determined to find as her self perceives the truth without any compromise. She is an outsider because she stands for truth.

Recognition and fame, however, came to her ultimately as she predicted in one of her letters to Higginson : "If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her" (Letters Vol. II: 408). She was right indeed. Twentieth century reception of her life and poetry is indeed astonishing. She is now indisputably regarded as one of the greatest American poets. Even Mallarmé admired her as "a full-fledged precursor to the European symbolist movement" (Handbook 385). A number of twentieth century poets, both male and female, show her direct impact upon their poetry. Of the male poets who are substantially influenced by her oeuvre, we can name Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost and Hart Crane. Women poets of the twentieth century, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath and particularly Adrienne Rich enthusiastically responded to Dickinson's poetry discovering in her oeuvre a counter-tradition of women's literature. Even the late twentieth-century women poets often find their own concern articulated in Dickinson's verse (Handbook 337). The acceptance of Dickinson and her poetry by "non-critical" audiences other than the literary critics and the poets is also remarkable. Her life and poetry have been widely adapted in drama, dance and music in the United States and even abroad. According to a Dickinson scholar, some of the twentieth century's "most distinguished artists . . . have produced or performed in memorable, internationally renowned works in tribute to Dickinson" (Handbook 385). Her poetry has made summer when the "lady lie/ In Ceaseless Rosemary (675).

However in her heart of hearts, she was convinced of the enduring value of her poetry which she hoped would "distill amazing sense from ordinary Meanings-" and would be "exterior - to time" - (448). We end this final chapter echoing the quiet confidence of this outsider artist in her power to "dazzle" us with her "competeless" poetry. :

My Splendors are Menagerie -
 But their Competeless Show
 Will entertain the Centuries
 When, I am long ago
 An Island in dishonored Grass -
 Whom none but Beetles - know. (290)