

THE POET AS AN OUTSIDER :
A CRITICAL STUDY OF EMILY DICKINSON

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF PH.D IN ENGLISH

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2002

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am profoundly grateful to my supervisor, Mr. Kamal Kumar Roy, Professor of English at the University of North Bengal, who amidst his many preoccupations found time to help me with his valuable suggestions, brilliant criticism and constant encouragement.

I am also indebted to Dr. Isaac Sequeira, Professor of English at Osmania University, who assured me of the potentiality of the dissertation topic and encouraged me to explore the subject.

My thanks are also due to Dr. Benoy Kumar Banerjee, Dr. Girindra Narayan Roy and Dr. Ashis Sengupta, all of North Bengal University for their supportive encouragement.

I also wish to express my thanks to the staff of the North Bengal University Library, the A.S.R.C. at Hyderabad and the National Library, who gave me all the co-operation I needed.

I must thank my son also for living with this project with understanding and support.

Finally, I wish to express my appreciation to my husband whose loving encouragement and practical assistance greatly enabled the completion of this dissertation.

Preface

Emily Dickinson's life and poetry manifest characteristics that place her far apart from the literary community who were her immediate contemporaries. She lived an intensely private life and wrote poetry that belongs definitely to no particular literary or philosophical school of her time. The unconventionality of her poetic style prefigures modern American poetry and marks her alienation from the contemporary poetic tradition. This also accounts for her lack of recognition until the early twentieth century. In the sixties and seventies of the last century, Dickinson gained world-wide fame reaching beyond the boundaries of the United States to different Asian and European countries. With the seventies onwards, multiple, critical perspectives focus on her, testifying to the profundity of her poetic vision that defies any rigid categorization.

Some outstanding critical studies from the seventies and the eighties of the last century spanning psychological, stylistic and other modern critical approaches include John F. Cody's After Great Pain : The Inner life of Emily Dickinson (1975), Rebecca Patterson's Emily Dickinson's Imagery (1979), Karl Keller's Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty : Emily Dickinson and America (1979), David Porter's Modern Idiom (1981), Sharon Cameron's Lyric Time : Dickinson and the Limits of Genre (1979), Barton Levi St. Armand's Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society (1984) and David S. Reynolds's Beneath the American Renaissance : The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville (1988). Some of the significant feminist studies are Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination (1979), Margaret Homans's Women Writers and Poetic Identity : Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson (1980) and Joanne Feit Diehl's Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination (1981). All three, landmarks of early feminist criticism, have opened up new vistas in Dickinson scholarship. The nineties are also quite

prolific in approaching Dickinson through various interesting view points. Judith Farr in The Passions of Emily Dickinson (1992) explores Dickinson's links with the landscape painters of the time. Dicki Margaret's Lyric Contingencies : Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens (1991) examines how Dickinson's lyric disrupts Emersonian tradition. Sharon Cameron in her recent study Choosing and Not Choosing : Dickinson's Fascicles (1992) contends that the poet's refusal to choose between alternative thematic and philosophical meaning challenges the idea of a fixed meaning in a literary text. Paul Crumbley's 1997 book Inflections of the Pen : Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson analyses Dickinson's stylistic peculiarities in the light of dialogic criticism. Paula Bennet's Emily Dickinson : Woman Poet (1990), Mary Loeffelholz's Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory (1991) and Martha Neil Smith's Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson (1992) are important feminist studies of the nineties that merit special mention.

Several of these perceptive studies touch upon Dickinson's sense of estrangement and its pervasive influence on her life and art. The present study, however, intends to examine Dickinson as a poet who is essentially an outsider. It is concerned with her alienated consciousness as the central shaping influence on her poetry.

The first chapter demonstrates her estrangement in terms of her personal relationships, the second in terms of her personality. The second chapter also briefly discusses her feminist tendencies with which later-day feminist poets like Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath and several others identify. The third chapter focuses on the religious nonconformism in her poetry. Chapter four highlights Dickinson's deviation from the contemporary literary tradition epitomised by Emerson and Whitman. Her distinctiveness as a woman poet vis-a-vis the contemporary women poets is discussed in the fifth chapter, with emphasis on her individual treatment of the female literary conventions of the time. Chapter

six presents her as a romantic poet with a difference. The concluding seventh chapter briefly examines Dickinson against various theories of alienation.

The conviction that underlies this thesis is that Dickinson's elusive personality cannot be neatly pigeon-holed and that her poetry resists straight-jacketing within a single critical theory.

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CHAPTER-I
"HOMELESS AT HOME"

CHAPTER - I

"Homeless at Home"

Deeply attached to her home and family, Emily Dickinson was a home bound recluse throughout her life. She loved her home intensely. Her father's house at Amherst was her "My own dear Home" (Sewall, The life of Emily Dickinson 59). Her poems often celebrate the feeling of warm security we generally associate with home. She can imagine vividly the ecstasy of one who reaches home when "Night" descends "Dumb and dark" (207)¹:

Transporting must the moment be-

Brewed from decades of Agony- (207)

Many of her poems also frequently derive their power from a fitting use of the imagery of home as a multifaceted symbol covering all her major concerns such as God, heaven, love, faith and fulfilment. This symbolic use of home in her poetry is almost Shakespearean in the sense that Shakespeare associated home with fulfilment, worthiness or effectiveness in many of his plays such as Hamlet, Macbeth and Othello. In its richness of meaning, her home symbol is much like her valuation of her literal place at home : "Area no test of depth" (The Letters of Emily Dickinson Vol. III: 764). Her letters are no less enthusiastic in celebrating the sanctity of home :

Home is a holy thing-nothing of doubt and distrust can enter it's blessed portals ... here seems indeed to be a bit of Eden, which not the sin of anyone can utterly destroy-smaller it is indeed, and it may be less fair, but fairer it is and brighter than all the world beside. (letters Vol.I: 150)

¹Poems will be cited according to Thomas H. Johnson's numbering in The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.

"Home", she is certain, "is the definition of God" (Letters Vol. 11: 483).

However, ironically enough, despite her intensely private home-life and her celebration of home and family in her poems and letters, Dickinson's authentic inner self, the "Volcano" within, remained beyond the understanding of even the closest people around her. She was, to use her own words, "alien, though adjoining" (1219). Her insistence that "Consciousness is the only home of which we now know" (Letters, Vol.2: 634) perhaps indirectly points to the sense of inadequacy she felt in her interaction with her home and family. Jean McClure Mudge observes in this context that Emily Dickinson's "early recognition of two selves, 'me' and 'my spirit', may have meant that her second consciousness was the one she chose for a sole companion" (Emily Dickinson and the Image of Home 7). Living in a kind of psychic isolation from others, Dickinson perhaps found her haven in her own mind. So she observes :

Exhilaration-is within -
 There can no Outer Wine
 So really intoxicate
 As that diviner Brand
 The soul achieves - Herself - (383)

Her family consisted of her parents and two other siblings. An analysis of her relationship with each of them as documented in her letters and in some reliable biographies confirms above observations to a significant extent. Dickinson's father, Edward Dickinson, was a typical nineteenth century gentleman with conservative ideas about women. Women, he was convinced like many others of his time, should have no intellectual aspirations and should remain satisfied within their defined social sphere. In his opinion, "Modesty and sweetness of disposition, patience and forbearance and fortitude are the cardinal

virtues of female sex. ...These will atone for the want of brilliant talents" (qtd. in Wolff 120-121). This mindset blocked Edward Dickinson's understanding of the creative aspirations of his extraordinary daughter. For him, Emily had no vocation outside the domestic sphere. Dickinson writes to her brother Austin Dickinson, lamenting their father's inability to comprehend her struggle to carve out a new course for herself : " We do not have much poetry, father having made up his mind that it's pretty much all real life. Father's real life and mine sometimes come into collision, but as yet, escape unhurt!" (Letters Vol.I:161). To T.W. Higginson, her literary mentor, she writes rather humorously about her father's ideas about the books his children should read: "He buys me many Books but begs me not to read them-because he fears they joggle the Mind". (Letters Vol, II: 404-5). The same strain continues in her letter to John Lyman, a close family friend: "My father seems to me the oddest sort of a foreigner. Sometimes I say something and he stares in a curious sort of bewilderment" (Sewall, Lyman Letters 70). In fact, Dickinson's letters frequently bring to the fore her acute sense of her emotional distance from her father. Nowhere in her correspondence we see any indication of paternal praise for her poetry. It is indeed ironical that after more than a hundred years, he is solely remembered because of his illustrious daughter of whose literary genius he was entirely ignorant. Her feeling of emotional alienation from her father perhaps had some indirect impact on her image of God as a distant and uncaring father in some of her poems (376, 836). God, in her vision, is a stern, cold father, who sits in his remote seat in heaven while his "Perturbless Plan" (724) ruins human existence. A distant, stately father, God does not answer the prayer of the needy :

Of course I prayed.-

And did God Care?

He cared as much as on the Air

A Bird-had stamped her foot — (376)

God is an "old neighbor" who, most of the time, recedes "more than a firmament from Me" (240). The child persona in no. 576, yearning for a protective, heavenly father, seems to echo her creator's own wishful dream for a more fulfilling relationship with her father :

And often since, in Danger,

I count the force 't would be

To have a God so strong as that

To hold my life for me (576)

Albert Gelpi says justly of Dickinson and her God that "In His remote seat he seemed a Father to others but not to her-parentless in heaven as she sometimes seemed on earth" (The Mind of Emily Dickinson 37).

Modern researches assert on the basis of recently available materials that contrary to previous assumption, Mrs. Dickinson was fairly well-educated. However, it cannot be refuted in the light of Dickinson's letters that her mother was no better than her father so far as understanding and appreciation were concerned: "My mother does not care for thought" (Letters Vol.II: 404). Dickinson pours out her anguish to Higginson, her literary mentor: "I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled". (Letters Vol.II: 475). Her mother loved her no doubt. But mere love could not compensate for the necessity of comprehension which her gifted daughter needed most. "She seems to have had little idea of what Emily was up to" reflects Sewall and quotes a contemporary in support of his surmise: "Dickinson was perhaps a 'mystery and a constant surprise' to her mother". (Life Vol.II:85). Her youthful

letter to Jane Humphrey tells us of her unhappy sense of isolation : "Vinnie [her sister] you know is away and that I'm very lonely is too plain for me to tell you - I am alone - all alone" (Letters Vol.I:83). No less revealing is her curious observation in one of her letters to Mrs. J.G.Holland. Writing about her sister, she tells her:"She has no Father and Mother but me, and I have no Parents but her" (Letters Vol.II:508). Letter after letter thus underscores this emotional distance from her parents notwithstanding their physical proximity.

This childhood lonesomeness leaves its stamp on her poetry. Child persona in many of her poems is often a lonely and neglected child or an orphan or a beggar. The child in 959 is a "Mourner walked among the children" and is always haunted by a "loss of something". The child speaker in 801 voices her feeling that her lot in her life is "too hungry to be borne". No.579 continues in the same vein: "I had been hungry, all the Years". Here we have the image of a lonely child who "when turning,hungry, Home/I looked in Windows, for the Wealth/ I could not hope for Mine" (579). The poem goes on to speak about "the Crumb the birds and I,had often shared/In Nature's Dining room-". The anxiety and the deprivation of a lonely child is no less touching in no.215. The child in the poem wishfully dreams of "Paradise" as a happy, loving home, free from the cold indifference she is used to in her earthly home, where she "never felt at Home"(413):

Is it always pleasant - there -

Won't they scold us - when we're homesick -(215)

She longs for an affectionate father in her heavenly home :

You are sure there's such a person

As a "Father" — in the sky — (215)

The loneliness of the child comes out tellingly in her innocent revelation in the last two lines :

May be- "Eden" — a'n't so lonesome
As New England used to be! (215)

All this endorses John Cody's diagnosis of the cause of Dickinson's supposed destructiveness: "Much of the potential violence seems to have been a reaction to a sense of affectional deprivation for which both parents in different ways were responsible" (Cody 98).

We notice on the part of her siblings too the same intellectual incomprehension of her personality even though the three Dickinson children were very close to one another. Lavinia, her sister, was almost a mother to her, sheltering her from outside intrusion. But she was hardly Dickinson's equal in intelligence and sensitivity. Dickinson reflects on her sister's astonishment in one of her letters to Joseph Lyman at "Some things I say" (qtd. in Sewall, Life Vol.I: 151). Sewall writes on their relationship : "Above a certain level, there was little communication between them" (Life Vol.I:130).

Austin Dickinson, her brother, however, was closer to her in "temperament and taste" (Sewall, Life Vol.II:428). He was, perhaps, as Sewall observes, "Emily's greatest resource" (Life Vol.II:428). When Austin Dickinson was away at Harvard Law school, she wrote him numerous letters that reveal her deep concern for his well-being. But how much the brother cared for her, or understood her "can only be surmised" (Sewall,Life Vol.II:428). Sewall rather doubts whether the brother was very much of a "sustaining" force "on matters that troubled her most during these early years and later ..." (Life 428). Perhaps, he also

understood very little of her literary aspiration and abilities. From one of her letters to her brother, we learn that Austin found her writing style too complicated: "You say you don't comprehend me, you want a simpler style". (Letters Vol.I:117). Austin's literary tastes, observes Sewall, were rather conventional, nourished by the poetic cadences of Tennyson and Longfellow. So "He had no ear for Emily's poems" (Sewall, Life Vol.1: 225). The emotional bond between the two also gradually decreased with Austin's marriage and his absorption in his professional and social life while Dickinson gradually withdrew from the surrounding world into the world of her own mind. So her brother too, though intimate, was in a way, estranged from her. Dickinson felt this acutely and this comes out in her sad remark about their relationship: "I guess we shall Journey separately" (Sewall, Life Vol.II: 442). Thus for all her attachment to her family, Dickinson always suffered from lack of understanding inside the family circle. Not surprisingly, she sometimes felt herself "homeless at home" (1573). Frequently, in her letters she appears to be rather ambivalent about her home. To Jane Humphrey, her girlhood friend, she grumbles about being stereotyped and so expected to cultivate "meekness - and patience and submission" (Letters Vol.1:82). To Higginson, she poses a telling question, "Could you tell me what home is?" (Letters Vol.II:475), suggesting perhaps her complex and ambivalent attitude to home. Evidently, she conceives of home as a psychic space where the inmates enjoy the same sense of belonging, understanding and congeniality. Perhaps by the time she made these remarks, her Amherst home seemed alien to such a vision. Eventually her wishfulness about home evaporates: "I have read of Home in the Revelations - Neither thirst any more" (Letters Vol.II: 635). However, as with all truly creative minds, her sense of psychic isolation transforms itself into touching poetry. Her turbulent inner life is like a "quiet volcano" which seems like a meditative spot, "and a proper place for the birds to choose" while

actually it hides the "firerocks below". The poem ends with this warning:

How insecure the sod

Did I disclose

Would populate with awe my solitude. (1677)

From this feeling that people fail to understand her come up such lines as the following :

Between My Country and the Others-

There is a Sea- (905)

Equally touching is her pensive thought about her poems that "This is my letter to the World/ That never wrote to Me" (441). May be, her observation about herself to Higginson in one of her famous letters springs from this acute sense of loneliness : "You ask of my Companions - Hills - Sir - and the Sundown - and a Dog -large as myself, that my Father bought me -"(Letters Vol.II:404-5). Perhaps, she turned to nature "in her despair over humans" (Sewall, Life Vol.II:544). Sewall seems to be quite right when we read " my best Acquaintances are those/ With whom I spoke no word-" (932). Her quest for a "rare ear / not too dull" mostly ended in dissatisfaction (842).

Not only in her interaction with the people closest to her, her sense of isolation continued through all her relationships. To quote Sewall, "There are problems in almost everyone of Emily's important relationship" (life Vol.II:429). She had a number of close female friends, her "family of sisters" as she called them fondly. But as she matured and discovered her poetic vocation, Dickinson started drifting apart from her intimates. This is perhaps because of her growing realization that she was to gravitate towards the forbidden. This she adumbrates

to Jane Humphrey : "I have dared to do strange things-bold things, and have asked no advice from any – I have heeded beautiful tempters, yet do not think I am wrong" (Letters Vol.I:95). She further confides to her friend Abiah Root that "I have come from 'to and fro, and walking up and down' the same place that Satan hailed from ." (Letters Vol.I :99). Dickinson's aversion to conformity also shows through when she pictures to herself her correspondent as a female stereotype : "I presume, you are loving your mother, and loving the stranger, and the wanderer, visiting the poor, and afflicted, and reaping whole fields of blessings" (Letters Vol.I:99). By the late 1850, she ultimately confronted the reality, as her letter to Abiah Root evidences, that with her growing sense of poetic vocation and quirky personality she was destined to live in a separate reality unable to be comprehended by her friends : "We are growing away from each other, and talk even now like strangers. You are growing wiser than I am, and nipping in the bud fancies which I let blossom - perchance to bear no fruit, or if plucked, I may find it bitter" (Letters Vol.I:104). The serenity and peacefulness of her friends made her aware of her psychological separation from them. Unlike her friends, she woke up to the emergence of a new self, of a different sense of power within herself.

The thrill and fear at this self discovery we notice in her letter to Abiah Root also : " My rebellious thoughts are many and the friend I love and trust in has much now to forgive. I wish I were somebody else - I would pray the prayer of the 'Pharisee' but I am a poor little 'Publican-' " (Letters Vol.I:103).

However, the fear and the apprehension turn into solid conviction that "It's a great thing to be 'great' ... you know some cannot sing, but the orchard is full of birds ... what if we learn ourselves someday" (Letters Vol. II:345). Here is an implicit declaration of her adoption of an off-beat vocation-"the golden dream"-

that brings seclusion in its train. Expectedly, her singularity further increased with the passage of time. She puzzled people as "She was not like everybody else of that day and place" (Bianchi, Emily Dickinson : Face to Face 37). The final upshot was the popular image of the "Rare and mysterious Emily" (Leyda Vol.I:376). No wonder, Dickinson makes loneliness her direct concern in some of her verse. The speaker in 405 is so accustomed to her aloneness that "it might be lonelier without the loneliness". To the poet, loneliness is like standing "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 nature of loneliness comes out with an awful sense of fear in No.777:

The loneliness one dare not sound -
 And would as soon surmise
 As in its Grave go plumbing
 To ascertain the size.

The final lines of the poem define "loneliness" as the "Maker of the soul". Its "Caverns and Corridors illuminate - or seal - "(777). In her case, however, loneliness illuminated and fostered her poetic self. Martha Dickinson Bianchi, her niece, reasons on this point that her kind of loneliness was the gift whose riches she herself pronounced "beyond the power of mortal numeral to divulge" (Emily Dickinson : Face to Face 66).

Added to the estrangement from her family and friends was that from Dickinson's literary colleagues. T.W. Higginson, Samuel Bowles, Josiah Holland were some of her most important acquaintances. These gentlemen, all distinguished in their own fields, however, were all staunch conformists while Dickinson was an aggressive individualist. Her outward equanimity concealed

a rebellious soul impatient of the counterfeit and the derivative. An iconoclast that she was, she remained an inaccessible loner even among those people whose friendship she treasured. A brief discussion of her relationship with them will throw into sharp relief her position as a spiritual solitary.

T. W. Higginson, for instance, exemplifies a nearly tragic failure in understanding Dickinson's authentic self. Higginson, her dear preceptor, was an outstanding literary critic of the time and also a well-known supporter of the liberal cause including feminism. His sympathetic article "Letter to a young contributor" in the Atlantic Monthly (April 1862) encouraged Dickinson to initiate correspondence with him. She sent him four of her poems with a letter for comments. These four poems were "I'll tell you how the sun rose" (318), "We play at paste" (320), "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (216) and "Nearest Dream Recedes unrealised" (319). She wanted to know "Is my verse alive?". Her reason for the query was that "the Mind is so near itself-it cannot see distinctly and I have none to ask" ((Letters Vol.II:403). Unfortunately, Higginson held that current taste and conventions determined poetic merit. His literary standards were conventional and hardly appropriate for evaluating Dickinson's radical technique. Higginson, Chase observed, "was the essence of nineteenth-century Boston gentility and a combination of all that was bland and easily accomplished in Emerson and Matthew Arnold" (Chase 275). He got seven of her best poems including a very remarkable one - "There came a day at Summer's full" (322). But Higginson, "miles away from her imaginatively" as Sewall observes, failed to respond to her individuality with supportive encouragement (Life 550). He thought her "wayward", "Eccentric", "Enigmatic," etc. and wrote to his colleague James T. Field that Dickinson's poems were "fortunately not to be forwarded for publication". He even told his mother that her poems were "effusions" that quite "overwhelmed" him (Leyda 2:55). We can infer from

Dickinson's replies to his letters that Higginson dismissed her work as "crude", "unruly" and "rough". She offers her explanation for her supposed awkwardness: "you think my gait 'spasmodic' - I am in danger Sir - you think me 'uncontrolled', I have no Tribunal". (Letters Vol.II:409). Referring to Higginson's failure to comprehend Dickinson's striking originality, Sewall writes: "He was as much mystified by her poetry as he was by her person, and as a literary advisor he failed her completely" (Life Vol.I:6). Assuming a kind of subservient pose to Higginson, she called him her "preceptor", "mentor", "Monarch" etc. She writes to him : "But will you be my Preceptor, Mr. Higginson?" (Letters Vol.II:409). In view of Higginson's rejection of her poems, Dickinson also renounced her ambition to be a published poet. Perhaps, she realised that if Higginson represented the best contemporary judgement, she had no hope for her "wayward" and "eccentric" poetry in the publication circuit. Resigned to her fate, she accepted the "Barefoot-Rank" of a private poet (Letters Vol.II:408). She did not, however, accept his literary advice and kept her faith in herself: "I thanked you for your justice but could not drop the Bells whose jingling cooled my Tramp -" (Letters Vol.II:408). Higginson's advice notwithstanding, she chose to be her own "self and not somebody else" (Letters Vol.II:519). Her "conviction," "that Granitic Base", saved her "though None be on our side" (789). The quiet confidence she had in her own worth perhaps reflects itself "slantly" in the last stanza of a poem she sent to Higginson with one of her letters:

Nor any know I know the Art
 I mention -easy - Here —
 Nor any Placard boast me —
 It's full as Opera — (326)

It was indeed unfortunate for Dickinson to choose Higginson as her literary mentor. His wrong evaluation of her personality and her poetry to a great extent

aggravated her isolation and sealed her fate as a professional poet. His baffled responses to her poetry confirmed her belief that she was an anomaly : "A Kangaroo among the Beauty" (Letters Vol.II:412). Karl Keller aptly comments on this : "The Higginson - Emily Dickinson relationship is one of American Literature's shocking examples of the lack of recognition" (Keller 215).

Dickinson's personal relationship with two other illustrious men of the time also demonstrates how all her close relationship is marked by a mixture of intimacy and distance, of affection and incomprehension. Samuel Bowles and Josiah Holland were both family friends and knew her intimately. But both men showed the same Higginsonian attitude in their dealings with Dickinson. Samuel Bowles was the handsome and intelligent editor of the Springfield Republican, one of the most influential newspapers of her contemporary America. An active and vigorous man, he was a very stimulating company; Dickinson valued his friendship until the day of her death. Recent critics such as Ruth Miller, David Higgins and Richard Sewall believe that Bowles was the recipient of her three passionate love-letters. Dickinson thought Bowles understood her and expected his assistance in publication. Perhaps she wanted him as a kind of philosophical, moral and literary guide. Her two very short letters, written to him in April 1860, show her attempt to communicate to him the central subject of her poetic venture, her anxieties and confusions about religion. She writes : "you spoke of the 'East'. I have thought about it this winter. Don't you think you and I should be shrewder, to take the Mountain Road? That bare-headed life-under the grass worries one like a wasp" (Letters Vol.II:364). But Bowles hardly responded to her urgent feelings. He was a practical and worldly man with little interest in her complex ideas about faith and afterlife. The religious views expressed in the consolation literature of the time were sufficient to solve his religious problems, if any.

Dickinson the poet was also beyond Bowles's reach. His taste in literature was poor and conventional. He liked the predictable and conventional poetry of the type published in the Springfield Republican. He considered Helen Hunt Jackson, a mediocre contemporary poetess, a writer "who stands on the threshold of the greatest literary triumph ever won by an American Writer" (Keller 196). He had no respect for intellectual women and artists. His writings in the Springfield Republican amply prove that he could not think of women beyond the conventional terms :

The only thing to be feared is that too many susceptible women will at once think they were born artists, and only need development, and will put themselves outside the pale of domestic life and the society which they naturally require, to nourish their mistaken endeavours. But the sensible women of taste will outnumber the foolish ones, and it will be no more terrible to have the country flooded with mistaken women-artists, so called, than with mistaken women-poets, who are so numerous lately. (qtd. in Wolff 245)

Obviously, Bowles was too obtuse to appreciate Dickinson's conceptual and stylistic complexities, used as he was to the stereotyped pattern of contemporary women's poetry. He could comprehend her neither as a person nor as a poet. The Springfield Republican published six of her poems only after modifications. Writing on these editorial modifications, Sewall comments : " — the hospitality of the Republican was anything but cordial. Only five of her poems were printed, all anonymously, all with manufactured titles, most with petty alterations towards conventionality ..." (Life 476). Those changes show Bowles's mistrust of her abilities. He found Dickinson's poem on the snake "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" (986) impressive because he thought that the poet

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was aware that corn would not grow in boggy soil. Dickinson was very fond of Mr. and Mrs. Bowles. She exchanged letters with them for over twenty years and still remained an unknown quantity to them. This leads Richard Chase to observe that Mr. and Mrs. Bowles were actually "some what baffled partners in a relationship of whose distant range and possibilities they cannot have been more than partly aware" (273).

Dickinson's friendship with J.G. Holland, co-editor of the Springfield Republican and later editor of the Scribner's Monthly, demonstrates again how much of an enigma she was to any of her intimates. Holland was thoroughly conservative in religious and literary matters. Allan Nevins wrote : "Dr. Holland wrote truisms insipid enough for young ladies' boarding school and religious enough for the most bigoted sectarian" (The Emergence of Modern America 232). Expectedly, his views on women and women writers were in conformity with the traditional outlook of the time. On women's role in society, he wrote :

Have women a sphere ? I think they have; but we will compromise and call it a hemisphere. Her mission is to love and it argues depravity of soul when a woman pants to enter the race and contend with men in the labour of life ... The hard work is to be done by man : Woman's apostleship is to cheer him in his struggle.
(Peckham 55)

Dr. Holland, like Samuel Bowles and Dickinson's family members, was only familiar with Dickinson's quiet external life that resembled that of the usual home-bound spinster. He little suspected the rebellious individual, the 'quiet volcano' below the surface. He was also unaware of the worth of her poetry. Dickinson was very much fond of the Hollands, particularly Mrs. Holland. But both of them

had hardly "any conception of Emily Dickinson as poet" (Sewall, Life Vol.II: 608). Holland's favourite poets were Longfellow, Whittier, Bryant, etc. With his concept of poetry embodying piety, morality and responsibility, he was unable to evaluate the depth of her "eccentric" verse. We know from Richard Chase's book that though Dr. Holland had seen Dickinson's poems, he thought "Mrs. Stowe and Mrs. Whitney are our best living writers of America" (qtd. in Chase 274). As editor, Holland judged Dickinson's poetry "really not suitable" because they seemed to him too "ethereal" (Chase 275). Dickinson the poet, thus, was too strong, too unreal for him. So her desire for a proper response to her subtlety and sensitivity remains a will-o'-the-wisp. She could never be her own self with anybody as she had no genuine soul mate. Naturally, she suffered from inescapable loneliness, the outsider's fate.

Dickinson's relationship with Susan Dickinson, her closest female friend since her girlhood and later her sister-in-law, was no exception. Supposedly, Susan Dickinson was the only person who understood Emily Dickinson's complex personality and her poetry. A number of Dickinson's letters and poems evince her passionate attachment for Susan Dickinson. Doting language of poem 1401 is a good example:

To own a Susan of my own
 Is of itself a Bliss-
 Whatever Realm I forfeit, Lord,
 Continue me in this !

Some of her early letters to Susan also testify to her fondness for her.

Susan, though intelligent and sensitive, was a woman of the world and was

free from Emily's insatiable curiosity, her spiritual restlessness. She also did not share Emily's religious scepticism. Dickinson's sense of identity with Sue began to evaporate on the score of their sharp difference over religious faith. A letter to Susan written in 1854 clearly shows this growing sense of estrangement. She writes : "Sue -you can go - or stay - There is but one alternative - we differ often lately and this must be the last ... I shall remain alone" (Letters Vol.I:305-306). The letter ends with her acute sense of pain at the sharp difference between their views and its consequent loss of earlier intimacy : "we have walked very pleasantly - Perhaps this is the point at which our paths diverge - then pass on singing Sue, and up the distant hill I journey on" (Letters Vol.I:306). Dickinson and Susan differed as much in their attitude to marriage. Dickinson viewed marriage with a curious mixture of apprehension and expectation, desire and anxiety. Fear of losing autonomy was also a major concern for her. An extract from her famous letter to Susan on this subject illustrates this ambivalent attitude to marriage, revealing both fear and attraction:

... You have seen flowers at morning, satisfied with the dew, and those sweet same flowers at noon with their heads bowed in anguish before the mighty sun; think you these thirsty blossoms will now need nought but - dew ? No they will cry for sunlight, and pine for the burning noon, tho' it scorches them, scathes them; they have got through with peace-they know that the man of noon is mightier than the morning and their life is henceforth to him. (Letters Vol.I:210)

A practical woman that she was, Susan did not subscribe to Dickinson's peculiar attitude to marriage. She had a passionate love-affair with Dickinson's brother

Austin Dickinson and married him while Dickinson remained single throughout her life. Dickinson gradually realized the difference between them at the deepest level : "The tie between us is very fine but a Hair never dissolves" (Sewall, Life Vol.I: 203). This sense of estrangement comes out tellingly in poem No.1219 :

Now I knew, I lost her
 Not that she was gone -
 But Remoteness travelled
 On her Face and Tongue
 Alien, though adjoining
 As a foreign Race- . . .

Susan Dickinson too, like others in Dickinson's close circle, failed to appreciate her poetic originality. She did not try much to publish her poetry as she feared that the public would not care for her verse. Determined to strike out on her own, Dickinson could not help being an outsider. She reveals in her poems her despair at living like an alien in her own home. Her search for the "rare Ear/ Not too dull-" (842) remained unfulfilled, and her poems were written as "Letters to the World" that never understood her. However, Dickinson ultimately overcame her sense of alienation and the consequent mental suffering through her uncompromising devotion to truth and poetry. She expressed her sense of truth in brilliant poetry which, we may presume, was her real home. Mudge observes perceptively : "She builds a life - sustaining temple of poetry which became her own sanctified house" (Mudge 119). Her success lies in the fact that she transcends her personal pain in the process and makes it convey general truths about the human condition.

Available documents about Emily Dickinson indicate that she tried to

have a meaningful love-relationship in her mature years with Otis Phillips Lord, who was a friend of her father and a distinguished public figure. Letters from Judge Lord do not exist. But Dickinson's letters to him prove beyond doubt that she achieved a real sense of communion with him and that her feelings towards him were those of abandonment in love. She got at least a much-needed relief for her spirit. Emily Dickinson complained that "All men say 'what' to me " and stayed away from society. (Letters Vol.II:415). "But in Otis Lord's presence 'thronged only with music like the Decks of Birds' - she 'sang'" (Sewall, Life Vol.II:667). Sewall comments : "As if after years of reticence, she had found someone in her maturity to whom she need not varnish the truth" (Life Vol.II:654). Her letters are shot through with this glorious sense of new found freedom:

My lovely salem smiles at me. I seek his Face so often - but I have done with guises. I confess that I love him — I rejoice that I love him-I thank the maker of Heaven and Earth - that gave him me to love - the Exultation floods me. I cannot find my channel — the Creek turns Sea — at thought of thee-. (Letters Vol.II:614-15)

It is obvious from her letters that her feelings of intimacy with Judge Lord were genuine and shared. Perhaps she had never known a similar experience before: "Oh : had I found it sooner, yet tenderness has not a date - it comes and overwhelms" (Letters Vol.III:728).

Despite all this, Dickinson spurned the opportunity for self-fulfilment as a woman. She rejected Lord's offer of marriage : "Don't you know you are happiest while I withhold and not confer - Don't you know that 'No' is the wildest word we consign to language?" (Letters Vol.II: 617). She was never able to lose her self to another completely. She needed to preserve her privacy intact for her vocation as a poet. We notice this fear of self-loss in a letter : "Oh my too beloved, save

me from the idolatry which would crush us both" (Letters Vol II : 616). When it came to the crunch, she did not hesitate to sacrifice the woman in her to the poet. Sewall rightly thinks that "the idolatry which would crush us both" was Emily's realization that complete abandonment to their love would destroy each of them in their vocation, "he as judge, she as poet" (Life Vol II : 655). Anyway, the feeling of alienation was her life-long companion. The causes of it are many and complex, sometimes external and very often internal. Even in her closest relationship, there was always a barrier, however thin. The following poem perhaps best expresses the subtle nature of this psychological barrier :

But 'tis a single Hair —
 A filament - a law —
 A Cobweb - wove in Adamant
 A battlement-of Straw — (398)

A congenital isolate, Dickinson naturally excels in the poetry of isolation.

CHAPTER-II
"SISTER OUTSIDER"

CHAPTER - II

A “Sister Outsider”

Dickinson was born in a conventional middle-class family in mid-nineteenth-century America. As a child of her time, she shared attitudes and interests of her contemporary women and conformed to their general life-pattern. Outwardly, she did not markedly deviate from the usual norm. In private life, she was a domestic woman and remained unmarried like many of her fellow women. In nineteenth-century America, domestic obligations were considered the most important by all women, irrespective of social classes. Harriet Martineau thus generalized on the issue under discussion: "All American ladies should know how to clear starch and iron: how to keep plate and glass: how to cook dainties: and if they understand the making of bread and soup likewise, so much the better" (Society in America 30). References to housework are quite common in the literary works by women writers. Susan Strasser in Never Done: A History of American House work (1982) offers an endless list of the domestic chores performed by the nineteenth-century women. Harriet Beecher Stowe's letter to her sister-in-law also reveals the countless household tasks she needed to perform at the time she was writing Uncle Tom's Cabin (Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe 128). Dickinson lived a secluded life and did not marry. Yet she had to do some of the household duties such as cooking, washing dishes, dusting, and knitting throughout her life. References to such domestic tasks are abundant in her letters. However much her mind was busy with poetic pursuits, her hands were often engaged with ordinary domestic chores. Joseph Lyman, a friend of the Dickinson family, comments: "Em is an excellent house keeper" (Sewall, The Life of Emily Dickinson Vol.1:87). So she knew the reality of contemporary women's lives intimately and portrays them in her verse sometimes with pity and sympathy, sometimes with subtle irony. For example, she describes

with quiet pathos in no. 187 the death of a house-wife who seems to represent countless ordinary women worn out by the perpetual burden of caring for others:

How many times these low feet staggered-
Only the soldered mouth can tell- (187)

It is, however, subtle irony which informs no.401 where she finds genteel women as "Soft Cherubic Creatures" and "Brittle" ladies. She was also conscious of her society's conception of women as weak, submissive and domestic. Her female persona is busy tidying a house littered by others:"The little note that others dropt/ I fitted into place" (1009). The poem "I would not paint a picture" (505) also shows her ironic awareness of women's role as conceived by society:

I would not paint- a picture-
I'd rather be the One
It's bright impossibility
To dwell-delicious-on-
.....
Nor would I be a Poet-
It's finer-own the Ear-
Enamored-impotent-content- (505)

She knew society liked to associate femininity with powerlessness. So her 'I' in this poem portrays women as "enamored", "impotent" and "content", that is, in the orthodox feminine roles projected by society. Indeed, her sense of femininity profoundly informs her personal and literary self.

However, a close scrutiny of her life and poetry demonstrates that Dickinson's similarity to the women of her time is only superficial. She had strong individuality, a passion for truth and for authentic experience. This insistence on unfettered autonomy and truth marks her out. Her poems, written in private, and hardly published during her lifetime, demonstrate her strong individual self concealed under an apparently conformist exterior. Of her many

characteristic poems, 1453 and 1454 stand out from the rest revealing her inner self that would never be a "Counterfeit-a Plated Person" (1453). She considers truth "good Health-and Safety and the Sky" (1453) and proclaims her conviction that "Truth" also "outlasts the Sun" (1455). Since "we cannot own them both-/ possess the oldest one- "(1455). She stuck to this uncompromising passion for authenticity in poetic expression throughout her writing career.

Evidently, Dickinson rejected imposed beliefs and secondhand experiences. Her rejection of dogmatic religious faith (discussed in the next chapter) stemmed from this unwavering commitment to experiential truth. This insistence on personal experience also separates her from her contemporary women in general. Beneath the placid exterior of a gentle spinster, she was actually, as her poems testify, a "still Volcano", an apparently "still volcano" over which "grows the Grass" (1677) and where the bird chooses to rest, but which actually "Bear within-appalling Ordnance/ Fire, and smoke, and Gun :

Taking Villages for breakfast,
And appalling Men- (175)

In the privacy of her poems, she seems to be a free spirit indifferent to the so-called morals and manners prized by the women of the time. Her lyric speaker thus famously celebrates her limitless freedom:

Inebriate of Air-am-I
And Debauchee of Dew-
Reeling - thro endless - summer days -
From inns of Molten Blue – (214)

Instead of being herself a brittle gentlewoman whom she satirizes in poem 403, Dickinson prefers to be a "little Tippler/leaning against the - Sun" (214) or a "tramp" (Letters II:408) or a "Gypsy" (163). The rebellious individuality concealed

behind the mask of conformity comes out in another poem where she says: "I took my power in my Hand/ And went against the world" (540). More interesting in this context is the poem beginning with the line "I'm ceded - I've stopped being Theirs"-(508). The poem shows how she scorns the "perpetual childhood", "one of the careers open to women" of the time (Chase 94):

And They can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading - too - (508)

The speaker renounces her former self and chooses a new one consciously: "But this time - Adequate - Erect, / with Will to choose, or to reject ." (508). This strong individuality and self-assertion are the basic factors that separate her from her female contemporaries. Her letter to her friend Abiah echoes this desire for autonomy and authenticity. She is "grateful" that she is her own "self and not somebody else" (Letters 11:519).

Dickinson's refusal to marry was no unique thing in nineteenth century America. Many contemporary women remained single and lived like Dickinson as gentle spinsters in their fathers' houses. So apparently Dickinson's unmarried life has nothing uncommon about it. Much effort has been made to explain her rejection of marriage as a reaction to some disappointment in love or as resulting from a kind of neurosis. May be, there is a grain of truth in all these speculations. At the same time, it must be said that Dickinson renounced the conventional route to the fulfilment of her womanhood through marriage and motherhood to remain true to her authentic inner self. She spurned marriage to pursue her sacred vocation of a poet with the utmost dedication.

A married woman, in Dickinson's society, for all her brilliance, was doomed to be an unthinking, "timid and trusting bride" (Griswold 187). A.D.T. Whitney's

Hitherto (1869) and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's The Story of Avis (1877) were written in the later years of the nineteenth century. Both these novels explore the stultifying effects of conventional marriage upon a brilliant woman. Alexis de Tocqueville noted that in America "The independence of women is irrevocably lost in the bonds of matrimony" (Democracy in America 201). Elizabeth Oakes Smith expresses the same sentiment in her account of her own reluctant marriage at the age of sixteen to a man much older than herself: "I transformed myself to an utterly different creature from what had been native to me, how carefully I folded my wings. I had lost girlhood and found nothing better to take its place" (Selection from the Autobiography of Elizabeth Oakes Smith 45).

Numerous poems of the period attest that marriage and duty were often synonymous for nineteenth-century women. Both represented chiefly self-sacrifice, suffering and death of the individual. Elizabeth Oakes Smith's poem "The Wife" highlights this uncomplaining sense of duty and pliability expected of a wife. Maria Brook's poem "The Obedient love of Women her Highest Bliss" also records this renunciation of the intellectual life by women:

To every blast she bends in beauty meek;—
 Let the storms beat, - his arms her shelter kind, —
 And feels no need to blanch her rosy cheek
 With thoughts befitting his superior mind
 Who only sorrows when she sees him pained,

(Cited in Walker 51)

The third and the fourth line of the poem indicate a wife's abdication of the intellectual life, and the last line "who only sorrows when she sees him pained" implies her effacement of the self. As a sensitive and intelligent woman, Dickinson acutely felt this psychic cost of marriage. She did have the yearning for the promised mystical transformation of women's status through marriage (Letters Vol.I:209-10). She knew social identity was not available to a single woman.

Dickinson has the wife symbolize maturity, power and strength in poem after poem. Yet her painful awareness of the loss of self in marriage always hovers around and finally triumphs over the illusory happiness of the married state. Nearly forty of her poems are about marriage, figurative or actual. Her attitude to contemporary pattern of marriage shows up in the following poem:

I am "wife"- I've finished that -
 That - other state -
 I'm Czar- I'm "woman" now -
 It's safer so -
 How odd the girl's life looks-
 Behind this soft Eclipse-
 I think that Earth feels so
 To folks in Heaven now -
 This being comfort - then
 That other kind - was pain-
 But why compare?
 I'm "wife" ! Stop there ! (199)

The poem begins on a note of apparent assurance and ecstasy at the married state. But the concept of wedlock as heavenly security and legal maturity loses strength when the poet says that "This being comfort", the other kind must be "pain". Because the use of dashes and stops implies a lack of real conviction. This belief on the part of the married woman appears to be a mere delusion. The loss of self is quietly suggested by the word "Eclipse". Marriage is a kind of "Eclipse" that makes the women invisible. The subtle irony in the last two lines shatters the illusion created in the first stanza. The speaker wife refrains from comparing the two states as if afraid of unfavorable consequences. Dickinson associates married life with its safety and comfort with the afterlife. Her ambiguity poses an implied question. Can safety and comfort justify the "Eclipse" of a life?

Her most overt exploration of the effect of marriage on the individual woman is in poem no.732. Here Dickinson seems to imply that the "honorable Work" of woman and wife requires a rejection of woman's own potential, her "amplitude and awe". A woman's precious possession of the inner life is regarded as mere "Playthings" (732) in her married state. Her "Fathoms" must lie "unmentioned" and unrecognized. A wife's state is equated with death in "A wife at Daybreak I shall be". (461). "Eternity-I am coming Sir"- the bride says to her approaching husband. Death, Christ and husband all merge into one figure in the poem. Invisibility and silence are the qualities of death. These are also the qualities that were ascribed to nineteenth-century women as contemporary records and women's literature testify. Dickinson's "wife" poems clearly illustrate that for her too these qualities were inextricably mixed with the idea of marriage. Her ambivalence towards marriage might also grow from an unconscious rejection of the life of her mother. She herself noticed the usual plight of young, attractive women submitting to passivity, silence and invisibility leading to chronic illness as in the case of her mother.

So Dickinson's spinsterhood assumes a new dimension when we consider it against the background of her marriage poems, her experience of the contemporary women's lives and particularly against the background of her determination to make poetry the only vocation of her life. Poem 1072 is very revealing in this context. She knew well her contemporary society equated women with wife. To her also, the wife meant a mature, adult woman. In "Title Divine-is mine"(1072), Dickinson proclaims her conviction that she has achieved the status of "wife", meaning that of an adult woman, by just being a poet without taking on the legal identity of a wife :

Title divine - is mine- !
 The wife - without the Sign!
 Acute Degree-conferred on me -

Betrothed without the swoon
 God sends us Women - - (1072)

She has married her art and achieved the divine identity of a poet. And thereby she avoids the "swoon", loss of individuality, and of self-awareness that inevitably accompany marriage in her contemporary society. She also had the desire for the mystical transformation marriage seemed to offer. However, she achieves this not as a conventional wife but as a woman poet savouring the exhilaration of the creative act.

From her early girlhood, Dickinson was aware of her uniqueness and of her singular destiny. The sense of power she felt within herself shows through in her letter to her cousin Loo Norcross in the 1850s:

It's a great thing to be 'great' loo, and you and I might tug for a life,
 and never accomplish it, but no one can stop our looking on, and
 you know some cannot sing, but the orchard is full of birds, and
 we all can listen: What if we learn, ourselves, some day! (Letters
 vol.2:345)

As her letter testifies, she was precociously aware of her separate, poetic self: "you are growing wiser than I am, and nipping in the bud fancies which I let blossom-perchance to bear no fruit, or if plucked I may find it bitter" (Letters vol. 1:104). No Wonder, many of her poems articulate this awareness of her power and her inherent worth. One of her poems on the spider spells out her conception of her art to a perceptive reader:

The Spider holds a silver Ball
 In unperceived Hands -
 And dancing softly to Himself
 His Yarn of Pearl -unwinds - (605)

The "unperceived Hands" of the spider connects it with the unrecognized art of the "nobody" artist who refuses to compromise with an "admiring Bog" (288). Like the spider's invisible dancing, her art is also private and victorious:

Nor any know I know the Art
 I mention easy - Here
 Nor any Placard boast me
 It's full as Opera. (326)

Out of quiet conviction of her inherent worth, Dickinson scorns the conventional idea about a woman's life as insignificant, "small":

And then the size of this "small" life —
 The Sages-call it small —
 Swelled - like Horizons - in my vest-
 And I sneered softly - "small" ! (271)

Despite moments of literary uncertainty and despair, Dickinson perhaps was sure that the "tapestry" of her life that she wove like a spider in her poems would be ultimately remembered. The second stanza of poem no. 675 very subtly points to her hope about her poems kept secret in her table drawer:

The General Rose - decay -
 But this - in Lady's Drawer
 Make Summer - When the Lady lie
 In Ceaseless Rosemary - (675)

She uses uninflected verbs — "decay", "make", "lie" -to lift the situation from any definite historical context and imparts an aura of timelessness. True to her habit of telling things "slantly" she hopes that the "attar" in "Lady's Drawer", meaning her poems kept secretly in her table drawer, will make eternal summer. Indeed, she understood the quality of her work and trusted its power to counter oblivion. She was sure that the "I" of her poetry will have an eternal presence even when she would "lie in ceaseless Rosemary" (676).

So, in view of her awareness of her genius, it can be said that Dickinson's single life was a conscious choice. By renouncing marriage and motherhood and choosing absolute seclusion from society, she was able to avoid duty-bound domesticity and compulsory conventionality of a wife. The observation of Sandra Gilbert is worth quoting in this context: "Dickinson must have half-consciously perceived that she could avoid the necessity of renouncing her art by renouncing, instead, that concept of womanliness which required self-abnegating renunciation" (The Madwoman in the Attic 590). Adrienne Rich too thinks in the same vein when she says:

That Dickinson chose her seclusion knowing she was exceptional and knowing what she needed. She carefully selected her own society and controlled the disposal of her time. Given her vocation she was neither eccentric nor quaint. (Shakespeare's Sisters 100)

Loneliness thus was a potent source of her creativity.

So, under the surface conformity to the quiet life of a 'gentle spinster', Dickinson was an extraordinary woman, who chose to glow with the "white election" of her art even though this decision reduced her to a "Nobody" in her patriarchal society where only married women had some sort of status. Yet, she chose to be a childlike nobody rather than to become a wifely nobody. Contemporary spinsters, as are generally presented in the narratives of that time, tended the sick and left at death a packet of inspiring letters describing this ordeal. Dickinson too left packets of her writing. But she celebrated the adventure of her life in her poems instead of describing scenes of death and dying.

It is worth observing that Dickinson's childlike persona in both real life and in her art helped her much to keep her integrity against the demands her culture made on women. The pose of the child enabled her to assert her

independence and individuality. She won a freedom of some kind by refusing active participation in usual womanly activities of the time like joining sewing societies, music groups or church group, by not getting married. This refusal to lead a conventional woman's life kept her in a kind of childhood. The state of the child acted as a kind of retreat from the world's limiting expectation for women. Barbara Mossberg rightly thinks that "Dickinson's child persona is in large measure a crucial aspect of her systematic refusals to become bound in a conventional woman's life" ("Emily Dickinson's Nursery Rhymes", Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson. 60).

In fact, Dickinson stands all alone in her intense individuality. She shows hardly any important affinity with any section of contemporary women, be it conservative or liberal. She was beyond all recognized feminine types of the time. She had no enthusiasm for usual social and charitable work done by contemporary women's societies. She writes about such societies rather mockingly to her friend Jane Humphrey in 1850:

The Sewing Society has commenced again-and held its first meeting last week - Now all the poor will be helped - the cold warmed-the warm cooled-the hungry fed - - the thirsty attended to - the ragged clothed and this suffering-tumbled down world will be helped to it's [sic] feet again ... I don't attend-notwithstanding my high approbation - which must puzzle the public exceedingly. (Letters Vol.I:84)

Further, Karl Keller in his book Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty writes that in 1872 a contemporary novelist and reformer of women's condition Elizabeth Stuart Phelps wrote Dickinson requesting her participation in the women's cause (Keller 82-83). But her flat refusal of such social involvement comes out clearly from her reference to the matter in a letter to her cousin Louisa Norcross:

She wrote me in October, requesting me to aid the world by my

chirruph more. Perhaps she [meaning Elizabeth Stuart Phelps] stated it as my duty, I don't distinctly remember, and always burn such letters. - I replied declining. She did not write to me again - she might have been offended, or perhaps is extricating humanity from some hopeless ditch (Letters Vol.II:500)

She may have satirized women with moral causes in such a poem as the following:

She's tearful - if she weep at all -
 For blissful Causes - Most of all
 That Heaven permit so meek as her -
 To such a Fate - to Minister. (535)

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and other progressive women devoted their lives to the cause of women's social and moral reform. Reform for them meant improvement in dress, jobs, vocation, education, health, voting etc. Dickinson perhaps had her "approbation" of these things without being committed to them. She had a different sense of reality. Her "basket", as she says in a poem, holds nothing but "firmaments" (352), and her business is to explore her own self.

Julia Ward Howe was another illustrious, contemporary woman who wrote frequently in the Atlantic Monthly. Leyda tells us that Dickinson read Howe's summary of George sand's autobiography in the Atlantic Monthly in November 1861 (Years and Hours 2:37). T.W. Higginson also advised Dickinson to read Julia Howe's poem "Stake my life upon the Red" as an "example of good verse" (qtd. in Keller 228). So Dickinson, we may presume, was acquainted with Julia Ward Howe. Julia Howe insisted on the moral and ethical role of women in society. In one of her suffrage lectures, she says:

Revere the religion of home, ... keep its altar Flame bright in your heart... Return from your furthest flight to the dear shelter of your home. Make the place beautiful with your affection ... hang your

laurels, if you win any, upon its walls. (Florence Howe Hall. 171)

In her insistence on the role of women as the guardians of social morality, Howe belonged to the conventional majority of the period.

Besides Howe, Lydia Maria Child was one of the leading feminists of the time. She was a genuine liberal and a sincere religious feminist. In her Good Wives (1883) Mrs. Child projects her image of ideal American women: "Good American women are those who helped their husbands to fame, those who educate themselves within and to the benefit of their homes and those who publicly championed moral causes" (Keller 230). Women's movement represented by the Right wing activists such as Julia Ward Howe and Lydia Maria Child can be summarized in Elsa Green's terms as "the duty of cheerfulness, the practice of purity, the instinct for a domestic life elevated to an unearthly perfection" (Elsa Green 21). In other words, these illustrious women were all advocates of the "cult of true womanhood" (Welter 21), the attributes of which were piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Despite apparent conformity to this stereotype in her external life, Dickinson was temperamentally unable to fit in with this image of 'true woman'. The unique personal nature of her individuality made her incapable of identifying with either Julia Ward Howe or Lydia Maria Child. Julia Howe's insistence on the moral responsibility of women was uncongenial to Dickinson's absolutely nondidactic and amoral character. She was concerned solely with the development and exploration of the individual self. Autonomy of the self irrespective of any rigid pattern was her only concern. In many of her poems, she portrays herself as a "tramp" or a "Gypsy" or a "Little Tippler". These would have appeared certainly frivolous and too wilful for any acceptable model for American women. Similarly, Lydia Maria Child's definitions of ideal womanhood also could hardly include the Dickinsonian model of independent selfhood. To these heavenly women, Emily Dickinson's intense concern for independence and desire for "Menagerie splendour"(290)

was an unintelligible phenomenon. Moreover, all these illustrious women were quite satisfied with traditional religious teachings. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps writes in "Gates Ajar":

Most young women of my age have their dreams, and a future probable or possible, which makes the very incompleteness of life sweet, because of the symmetry, which is waiting somewhere (9)

Dickinson with her religious scepticism and its consequent anxiety and dread stands remote from such soothing assurances.

The name of Margaret Fuller also comes up invariably while discussing Dickinson's differences from the other illustrious women of the time. Margaret Fuller was one of the first editors of the contemporary literary magazine Dial. She was the foreign correspondent of the daily New York Tribune and the author of numerous works of which the most important is Woman in the Nineteenth Century, (1845), which may be called the intellectual foundation of the feminist movement. A tireless champion of the emancipation of women from social and moral bondage, she urged women to be courageous, self-reliant and confident: "Let them be sea-captains if they will" (qtd. in Keller 237). Woman in the Nineteenth Century presents a panorama of women and their lives through which Fuller tries to generate feminine self-confidence. Throughout the book there are references to individual women, female writers and characters. Those were to serve as witness to the genius women possess. In Woman in the Nineteenth Century, Fuller also developed the idea of sisterhood. She argued that women must band together to help each other. Her thinking was that man cannot understand a woman's needs or adequately represent her, no matter how noble or good-intentioned he is.

It is surprising that Emily Dickinson did not show any interest in Margaret Fuller also. There are hardly any references to Fuller in her letters. And no clear indication about her reading of Fuller's writing is also available; perhaps

she did not read her feminist writing. Karl Keller surmises that possibly Margaret Fuller's reputation as a transcendentalist kept Dickinson from reading her. Yet, there was much in Fuller that would have attracted her. Fuller's stand on independence and autonomy is almost like Dickinson's. Margaret Fuller wrote:

What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home. (qtd. in Keller 237)

Dickinson also speaks in the same key in a number of poems. She also wanted to be a woman, "Adequate, erect /with will to choose or to reject"(508)

Fuller's idea of sisterhood was also an active principle in Emily Dickinson's life. Awareness of the sisterhood of women and the quest for it in her personal as well as in her literary life is quite clear in her letters and poems. Her personal life shows her dependence on her "family of sisters". Her own sister was her constant companion. She had close emotional and intellectual companionship with a number of female friends (discussed in chapter 1). Thus she followed Fuller's concept of sisterhood, though in a personal way of her own.

In the area of art too, Dickinson considered herself part of a poetic sisterhood. To a woman, wanting to write, knowledge of a female tradition is a psychological necessity. Dickinson's quest for models among the famous women writers of her day, particularly among the English women writers of the generation preceding her own, is a case in point. Her main literary heroines were Elizabeth Barret Browning, the Bronte sisters, George Eliot and George Sand. They recur frequently in her letters and comments. Elizabeth Barret Browning was clearly the strongest female influence upon her. Dickinson wrote three tributes to Barret Browning in the year following her death. They are (1) "Her- 'Last poems' " — (312), (2) "I went to thank Her -" (363), and "I think I was enchanted" (593).

This last-named tells how the witchcraft of her poetry spellbound her:

I think I was enchanted
 When first a sombre Girl -
 I read that Foreign Lady -
 The Dark - felt beautiful (593).

She seems to have known Barret Browning's verse novel Aurora Leigh almost by heart. She wrote a poetic tribute to Charlotte Bronte also – “All overgrown by cunning moss” (148). She was no less an admirer of George Eliot. Eliot's novel Middlemarch fascinated her: “What do I think of Middlemarch?’ What do I think of Glory — except that in a few instances this 'mortal has already put on immortality” (Letters Vol.II:506). In the following lines written after George Eliot's death, she pays tribute to her :

Her losses make our Gains ashamed –
 She bore Life's empty Pack
 As gallantly as if the East
 Were swinging at her Back. (1562)

Dickinson even felt biographical affinities with George Eliot :

Now my George Eliot, the gift of belief which her greatness denied her, I trust she received in the childhood of the kingdom of heaven perhaps having no childhood, she lost her way to the early trust and no later came. (Letters Vol.III:700)

Pictures of George Eliot and Elizabeth Barret Browning hung on her bedroom wall.

In fact, Dickinson's various references to women writers clearly demonstrate her identification with them as a group. These English women writers along with several American women novelists and poets provided her the necessary confidence that women too could become serious writers. Thus, she realized in

her personal as well as in her literary life Margaret Fuller's ideal of sisterhood advocated in Woman in the Nineteenth Century. Yet Fuller's sense of reality was a realm where Dickinson would have felt an outsider, a kind of misfit with her passion for abandon and wildness. With the other feminists of the time, Fuller also insisted on the moral perfection of woman :

The especial genius of woman I believe to be electrical in movement, intuitive in function, spiritual in tendency ... I wish women to live first for God's sake". (qtd.in Keller 238)

While Dickinson is amoral and non-didactic, Fuller appears to be opposed to any sort of wildness in woman : "The passions like fire are a bad master; but confine them to the hearth and the altar, and they give life to the social economy" (Keller 239). Fuller expected "Harmony, an obvious order and a self-restraining decorum most from a woman" (Ibid 239). Here Dickinson differs radically from Fuller. Her concern was freedom of the soul exempt from any pre-imposed responsibility. The desire for unsuppressed human nature often informs her poems. She knows that "Civilization spurns the leopard". (492) Her sympathy for the wild leopard shows her implicit identification with the beast, the symbol of her temperamental wildness :

Tawny — her Customs -
 She was Conscious -
 Spotted — her Dun Gown -
 This was the Leopard's nature - Signor-
 Need - a Keeper - frown? (492)

This passion for almost primitive wildness is seen repeatedly in many of her verses, especially in nature poems like "I taste a liquor never brewed" (214), in "We, bee and I-live by Quaffing"- (230) and also in no. 257 where the poet "for glee, / Took Rainbows, as the common way, / And empty Skies / The Eccentricity". The poet of the "Wild Night" who unabashedly speaks of her passionate desire — "Might I but moor — Tonight / In Thee"(249) could hardly

endorse Fuller's advocacy of morality and self-restraint. This would have gone against her credo of the free development of all the potentials of the individual self. Fuller's new woman was conceived too sociologically and morally to be a Dickinson woman. Fuller had her own ideas about the arrival of the perfect woman poet on the American scene. She writes in Woman in the Nineteenth Century :

And will not she soon appear ? — the woman Who shall vindicate their birthright for all Women; who shall teach them what to claim and how to use what they obtain? Shall not her name be for her era Victoria, — yet predictions are rash; she herself must teach us to give her the fitting name. (qtd. in Keller 239)

Fuller was not acquainted with the genius of Dickinson. But we feel that Dickinson would have failed to satisfy her criteria of the perfect woman poet. Karl Keller perceptively observes: "There is hardly a place in Margaret Fuller's reformed world for a female kangaroo" (The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty 239).

However, Dickinson was a feminist in her own way though she did not have any affinity with the dominating feminists of the time. She was not a feminist poet in the social or political sense of the word. She did not actively support the political campaign for women's rights. Her letters never mention the "Woman's Rights" conventions held in Massachusettes between the year 1850 and 1860 when Dickinson was in her twenties. She was, however, keenly aware of the insignificance of woman's life in her contemporary patriarchal society. Martha Dickinson Bianchi spoke about her "latent feminist tendencies" (The life and Letters of Emily Dickinson 26) . Dickinson marked two passages in pencil in her favourite Elizabeth Barret Browning's verse novel "Aurora Leigh". In one of the passages Barret Browning's heroine Aurora Leigh protests against the supposed triviality of a woman's life and activity in her patriarchal social culture:

By the way,
 The works of Women are symbolical,
 We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,
 Producing what? A pair of sleepers, Sir,
 To put on when you are weary-or a stool

 Or else at best a cushion, where you lean
 And sleep and dream of something we are not
 But would be for your sake. Alas, Alas!

(Aurora Leigh I,II 456-65)

That she marked this passage from "Aurora Leigh" is very revealing of her "sensitivity to", as Cheryl Walker observes, "the issues of male condescension and female mediocrity that were raised by the cult of true womanhood" (The Nightingale's Burden 108). She was also acutely aware, as her wife and bride group of poems reveal, of the anguish women felt at the continuous death-like extinction of personality or loss of self in a predominantly patriarchal society. The helplessness and the passivity of a woman's life that "mangle" her from within are subtly revealed in a number of poems. Poem 603 may be taken as a fine instance of this inward mutilation of woman. The toneless, almost mechanic quality of the language points to the pathos of willing submission :

He found my Being — set it up —
 Adjusted it to place —
 Then curved his name-upon it— (603)

In another, we notice a woman in the very process of being dehumanized bit by bit :

He fumbles at your Soul
 As Players at the Keys -

.....
 He stuns you by degrees -
 Prepares your brittle Nature
 For the Ethereal Blow · (315)

The sexual assault on women in the name of love or passion is implicitly expressed through these lines. The last two lines are almost explicit :

When winds take Forests in their Paws-
 The universe-is still- (315)

Such poems explain why early modern feminist poets like Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich hailed Dickinson as their nineteenth-century foremother. Dickinson's poetry was central to Rich's feminist ethics and poetics. In the title poem of her volume of poems, Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law (1963), Rich focuses on Dickinson's life and writing to demonstrate how female energies are thwarted by social codes and compulsory domesticity. She imagines Dickinson recreating the world through power of language even when busy with domestic chores:

Reading while waiting
 For the iron to heat,
 Writing, *my life had stood - a loaded Gun-*
 In that Amherst pantry while the Jellies boil and scum
 or, more often,
 Iron eyed and beaked and purposed as a bird,
 Dusting everything on the whatnot everyday of life.

(Snapshots 22)

Feminist critics from the 70s onwards to the final decade of the last century find in Dickinson's poetry myriad possibilities for feminist interpretations. Her poetry as Roland Hagenbüchle observes, has been the "ideal testing ground"

for feminist concern "with the position of woman and with the gendered power relations in contemporary society" (Emily Dickinson Handbook 371).

Dickinson's sense of femininity informs deeply, as modern feminist critics argue, her unusual poetics, and to a great extent, her thematic concerns. For instance, she conceives soul as feminine in a number of poems such as in 303 - "The Soul selects Her Society -", in 306 - "The Soul's superior instants / occur to Her alone" and in 512 - "The Soul has Bandaged moments -". "Exhilaration is within-" (383) is also another remarkable poem that glorifies the self portrayed as feminine :

Exhilaration - is within -
 There can no outer wine -
 So royally intoxicate
 As that diviner Brand
 The Soul achieves - Herself (383)

Truth is also feminine in her imagination as seen in the following example:

How vigorous a Force
 That holds without a Prop -
 Truth stays Herself-and every man
 That trusts Her - boldly up - (780)

Thus, Soul and Truth, the two supreme concerns of her poetry, portrayed as feminine, testify to her insistence on the significance of womanhood in her artistry. Margaret Homans in Women Writers and Poetic Identity (1980) and Crisanne Miller in Emily Dickinson : A Poet's Grammar (1987) explore the impact of her womanhood upon her radical poetics. Homans discovers the cause of Dickinson's disruptive linguistic style and consequent loss of its communicability in her departure from the conventional dualistic structure of language. Homans argues that Dickinson rejects conventional language structure in order to undo the hierarchical relationship between sexes where woman is

generally the other or the object. She offers a detailed analysis of poem 642 to prove her point that Dickinson's "greatest originality lies in her breaking out of the terms of gender altogether" (Women Writers and Poetic Identity 209). The soul is conceived here as a divided self. But the split parts of the self, which are divided but inseparable, remain unlabelled:

Me from Myself to banish -
 had I Art-

 But since Myself – assault Me -

 And since we're mutual Monarch
 How this be
 Except by Abdication -
 Me — of Me? (642)

Homans argues appropriately that this rejection of gender terms or hierarchical terms to define the halves of the self indicates "Dickinson's objection to the conventional language of sexual opposition and her effort to do without it" (ibid 209). Dickinson's poetry, in the process, however, loses communicability for traditional mindset used to dualistic linguistic structure. Even though she was not a proclaimed feminist, Dickinson tried to break away in her art from what French feminist critic Luce Irigaray suggests as hierarchically organized structure of language "that repeats and reinforces both the objectification and the repression of women" ("Women's Exile", Interview with Luce Irigaray in Ideology and Consciousness cited in Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson 116). Miller argues perceptively that "Dickinson writes slanting language to shield her audience from the volcanic power of her speech and understanding" (184). she also argues that "gender is the cohering factor of influence in the development of her poems' compressed, disruptive, doubling style" (Emily Dickinson : A Poet's Grammar 185). In her view, "the disruptions of her style mark her rejection

of the conditions of thought and action in which she has been raised" (A Poet's Grammar 184).

Dickinson, thus, was a feminist in her own undogmatic and individual way even though she did not associate with any contemporary school of feminism. She lived a very quiet unchequered life; yet she was a woman with a fierce sense of individuality and intense desire for personal freedom. She was a woman poet who held herself aloof from her contemporary female literary tradition (the subject of the next chapter). We cannot call her a woman of the nineteenth century in any intrinsic sense of the term. She was different from and ahead of others. She was, we may now justly say, a "sister outsider" (Audre Lorde 45).

CHAPTER - III
"STANDING ALONE"

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"Standing Alone"

Dickinson's alienated consciousness that informs her poetry to a significant extent seems to have its primary source in her religious scepticism. Her letters and poems abundantly testify to her life-long defiance of orthodox religious traditions of her contemporary society. She had no doubt profound "puritan traits" in her character as Sewall observed (The Life of Emily Dickinson Vol. I:19). Her personal life and poetic career, however, represent a sustained rebellion against the religious inheritance of puritanism. In her own words, she did not respect "doctrines" (Sewall, Life, Vol.:19), and "sermons on unbelief" always attracted her (Letters Vol.I :311). Her irreverent attitude to traditional faith also comes out clearly in her cynical remark on a religious sermon she attended at Amherst: "While the Clergyman tells Father and Vinnie that 'this corruptible shall put on Incorruption' - it has already done so and they go defrauded" (Letters Vol.II:508). Deeply religious in her own personal way, yet, always far from the ways of orthodoxy, she could not accept with unquestioning certainty that all cosmic questions have been solved by official theology. It was hard for her to "feel at home" in a "life that stopped guessing" (Letters Vol.II : 632). Committed to the truth of her personal experience, Dickinson felt acutely the conflict between her experiential truth and her inherited religious creed. For her, they were strong incompatibles. To her sceptical intelligence, "New Testament is myth"; "Jesus is not God but man". And "Eden is a legend dimly told" (qtd.in Gelpi 48). This conflict between existential experience on the one hand and conventional piety on the other produces the difference in her religious poetry.

At the outset, contextualisation of Dickinson's religious position is necessary for a proper assessment of the magnitude of her lonely resistance against conventional faith and of the impact of this struggle on her poetry. The New Englanders were mostly followers of the Calvinistic variety of Protestantism.

The central tenet of Calvinism is the absolute sovereignty of God in both nature and spirit. It also implies that creation is a revelation of the essential attributes of God. According to Calvin, mankind could infer the existence of God through reason, but the nature of the divinity or His intention is beyond human understanding. Absolute dependence on the will of God is the basic tenet of Calvinism. A true Christian must have absolute faith in the holy scriptures.

Lives of Dickinson's contemporary New Englanders were governed by this basic Calvinist theology. Amherst, Dickinson's native place, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff remarks in her study on Dickinson (1986), was almost primitive without having hardly any civic or life-sustaining facilities. Death was a painful reality in every house. As a result, Amherst was a stronghold of old-fashioned faith. The hope of some future heaven balanced against the haunting fear of death. The influence of the Bible upon the life of the community was many dimensional and profound. In fact, the Bible's promise of the resurrection was the only remedy for the brutal reality of death. Experience of conversion was also a dominating reality in the religious lives of the New-Englanders. Absolute faith in Christ and complete self-surrender to God were the most vital aspects of the conversion experience. A converted person receives grace and assurance through complete submission to God's will. The higher power of God takes possession of the person and renovates the soul after the surrender of the personal will. William James in his perceptive study, Varities of Religious Experience (1960), profusely quotes from the experience of the converted persons to illustrate how the converted persons felt a sense of joy after their conversion. Obviously, promise of a lasting peace and of a sense of security was a great attraction to a people plagued by dread of death. Fascination for the conversion experience was particularly strong for women. This was perhaps mostly due to women's close association with the spectacle of death, sickness and suffering. Cynthia Griffin Wolff reasons that there was another psychological reason for this importance of conversion to women. It was particularly significant to women as a sign of maturity :

Since secular professions were closed to the women of Dickinson's world, a public declaration of faith was the only thing that endowed a woman with a socially acknowledged adult identity that was independent of both father and husband. (Emily Dickinson 96)

Flood of conversion swept Dickinson's contemporary world from the 1830s to the opening of the war of Independence. All the members of her family and close friends also gradually surrendered to traditional religious doctrine one after another. Only Dickinson could not submit herself to faith. She had too independent a nature to relinquish her autonomy even to God. Resisting all pressure and persuasion, she clung to her independence and the inviolate integrity of an isolated self.

Dickinson resisted the dogmatic atmosphere of her early school days at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Seminary with the same unbending determination. Amherst Academy provided her with the most sophisticated learning of the time: "we have a very fine school ... I have four studies. They are Mental Philosophy, Geology, Latin and Botany ... I don't believe you have such big studies" (Letters Vol. I:13). However, academic curricula always reinforced religious teaching. From Wolff's extensive study on the subject in Dickinson (1968), we get to know that at the Academy William Paley's Natural Theology (1802) was taught to exhibit the proof of God as a rational, purposive maker of the natural world. Edward Hitchcock, who was a distinguished professor of Philosophy at Amherst during Dickinson's time, was able to adjust the scientific to the religious truths articulated in the Bible. Hitchcock argued :

Mathematics forms the framework of nature's harmonies... chemistry abounds with the most beautiful exhibitions of the divine wisdom and benevolence. The wide dominions of natural history embracing Zoology, Botany and Mineralogy, the theologian has found, crowded with demonstration of

divine existence and of God's providential care and government. (qtd. in Wolff 79)

Apart from this intensive theological education, Prof. Hitchcock used to have evening prayer sessions twice a week in his house. Influence of his fervent preaching converted numerous students of the Academy. Dickinson's letters tell us that she stayed away from revival meetings as she was afraid to trust her easily excitable nature. She writes about this trait of her character to one of her friends : "Perhaps you will not believe dear A. But I attended none of the meetings last winter. I felt that I was so easily excited that I might be deceived and I dared not trust myself" (Letters Vol. I:27-28). This yearning for truth and authenticity of experience marks her out from others. Ruthlessness of death carrying often friends and dear ones was a fearful puzzle to her also, as she confesses to Abiah Root : "I cannot realize that the friends I have seen pass from my sight ... will not again walk the streets and act their parts in the great drama of life, ..." (Letters Vol.I :28). Belief in immortality holding delightful promise of eternal existence and of reunion with the departed was alluring for her also. But to submit reason to faith confronted with the very essence of her being. Surrender of her independent self even to God's will was, as wolff observes, "an intolerable nightmare" for Dickinson. "Better to keep one's 'I' intact even if the promise of Paradise must be rejected" (Wolff 98).

With the same unbending determination, Dickinson also resisted the oppressive religious atmosphere of the Mount Holyoke seminary. Religious teaching was the guiding force of this school also. Mary Lyon, the principal of the school, herself a devout person, almost pressurized the students to be deeply religious. At Holyoke, Dickinson attended numerous meetings in which Mary Lyon preached against sin and evil of the hard-hearted men. Emily Lavinia Norcross, her cousin and room-mate at the seminary, writes about Dickinson's rebellious state in a family letter: "Emily Dickinson appears no different. I hoped I might have good news to write with regard to her" (Leyda Vol.I:135). Dickinson

herself writes to her friend Abiah Root: "There is a great deal of religious interest here and many are flocking to the ark of safety". (Letters Vol.I : 60). This stubborn resistance — "I have not yet given up to the claims of Christ" (Letters Vol.I : 60) — led to her estrangement from the believing community around her. She was unable to own the feelings that did not well up from personal experience.

However, her religious non-conformism did not come easily. External pressures were no doubt overcome by strong determination. But she had to fight hard with her own conflicting emotions, anguish and consequent psychic loneliness. Her letters to her friends during this period vividly record her longing to gain peace that an assured belief offers and her sense of misery at her intellectual inability to repose perfect confidence in God and His promises. The last letter she writes to Abiah Root well-articulates this feeling: "I am not happy and I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian ... my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world" (Letters Vol. I:67). To Jane Humphrey also she admits to this sense of misery and loneliness : "How lonely this world is growing ... Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him and I am standing alone in rebellion ..." (Letters Vol. I :94). Here are excerpts from two other letters revealing her conflicting emotions:

There is an aching void in my heart which I am convinced the world can never fill. I continually hear Christ saying to me 'Daughter, give me thine heart'. (Letters Vol. I : 27)

To Abiah Root again "... yet I know not why, I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affection. I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, ..." (Letters Vol. I:38). In another, she considers herself "one of the lingering bad ones" and continues sadly in the same letter, "I slink away, and pause, and ponder, and ponder, and pause, ... and do work without knowing why — not surely for this brief world, and more sure it is not for Heaven"

(Letters Vol.I :98). However, she was convinced that unquestioning orthodox beliefs were unacceptable to her inquiring mind though anxiety and doubt about her spiritual inadequacy as recorded in many of her letters pained her. However, she gradually overcame her hesitations and irresolution and gained the confidence to rely on her own experiences and on her emerging sense of vocation. Letters to her friends, Jane Humphrey and Abiah Root in April and May 1850 respectively, obliquely refer to her newly acquired confidence. She writes to Jane: "I have dared to do strange things – bold things ... and I have heeded beautiful tempters, yet do not think I am wrong" (Letters Vol. I:95). To Abiah Root she talks about how "I have been dreaming, dreaming a golden dream, with eyes all the while wide open, ..." (Letters Vol.I :99). With this emerging sense of an alternative religion other than the conventional one she resisted all persuasion to follow the common path and preferred even social and spiritual estrangement from the people closest to her in order to be true to her own self. Many of her early letters record this growing sense of isolation from her once-intimate friends : "We take different views of life, our thoughts would not dwell together as they used to when we were young – how long ago that seems !" (Letters Vol. I:104). The letter to Abiah Root also demonstrates the attraction and the fear that stormed her mind and her final decision to follow her "golden dream":

... You are growing wiser than I am, and nipping in the bud fancies which I let blossom — perchance to bear no fruit, or if plucked, I may find it bitter. The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea-I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger ! (Letters Vol.I :104)

Ultimately, she emerged as a poet who is unable to accept any specific creed.

Though Dickinson was almost a rebel against traditional faith, religion forms a major part of her poetry. She wrote poem after poem on death, God

and immortality, and treated these subjects in a remarkably different way from their treatment in the long tradition of devotional poetry. Devotional poets beginning with the Psalmists usually sing the glory of God and willingly submit to the sovereign will of God despite occasional complaints or grievances. The Psalmists celebrated God's creation and urged submission to His rule : 'Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands : Sing forth the honour of his name : make his praise glorious" (Psalms 66:1-2). In his great epic, Milton set out to justify the ways of God to men. For Dante too, experience conformed to the religious truth he learnt from his teachers. True to his Christian tradition, George Herbert also regarded praise of God as man's chief function. Lines from his poem "Providence" show this clearly :

Of all the creatures both in sea and land,
 Onely to man Thou hast made known Thy wayes,
 And put the penne alone into his hand,
 And made him secretarie of Thy praise.

(The Works of George Herbert 107)

Herbert's power as a poet lies in his complete adherence to Christian faith. Commenting on this profoundly devotional character of Herbert's poetry, Coleridge observes that to appreciate Herbert "It is not enough that the reader possesses a cultivated judgement, classical taste, even poetic sensibility, unless he is likewise a Christian" (Raysor 242). Herbert's poem "The Elixir" provides sufficient testimony to the truth of Coleridge's observation :

Teach me my God and King,
 In all things Thee to see,
 And what I do in anything,
 To do it as for Thee. ("The Elixir", stanza 1)

Even when there is complaint or grievance against God, surrender to the divine will is the final gesture. For instance, his poem "Denial" begins complaining against God's heedless ears :

When my devotion could not pierce
 Thy silent ears;
 Then was my heart broken, as was my verse;
 My breast was full of fears
 And disorder.

(The New Oxford Book of English Verse 256)

The poet prays to God "night and day" but "no hearing". Yet the final stanza is one of complete unquestioning submission, in spite of the reproach to the God who gives man power to pray but seems deaf to his prayer :

O cheer and tune my heartless breast,
 Defer no time ;
 That so thy favours granting my request,
 They and my mind may chime,
 And mend my rhyme.

(Ibid 256)

Donne's poems too, notwithstanding their complexity and intensely personal stance, meditate on sin, death, judgement, salvation and resurrection from a purely religious perspective. With his Christian faith in life-eternal, Donne conquers the fear of death :

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
 Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
 For those, whom thou thinks't, thou dost overthrow
 Die not, poor Death, nor yet cans't thou Kill me.

 One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
 And death shall be no more, Death, thou shalt die.

(Ibid 197)

Hopkins's rebellion against God as it appears in "Thou art indeed just, Lord" also transforms itself into prayer ultimately: "Mine, O thou Lord of Life, send my roots rain" (Ibid 790).

Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet who preceded Dickinson in her native American scene too demonstrate this usual pattern of devotional poetry. Both were devout Christians professing total dependence on God. Taylor's best-known poem "Huswifery" illustrates this complete submission to God:

Make me, O Lord, Thy spinning wheel complete,
 Thy holy word my distaff make for me,
 Make mine affections Thy swift flyers neat,
 And make my soul Thy holy spool to be

.
 (McMichael, Anthology of American Literature 176)

With Dickinson, this usual scenario of religious poetry changes significantly. Religious questions engaged her mind profoundly throughout her life. However, her poetry is far from devotional or religious in the traditional sense. She is not a devotee but a rebel. Poem after poem explores the traditional beliefs sometimes with irony and sometimes with the despair and anguish of a soul torn between a desire for certainty and the pressure of a sceptical intelligence. Religious vision in her poems stands in sharp contrast to the humility and acceptance that characterize much of traditional religious poetry. She could not "temper her insight", as Wolff argues, "to accept the traditional mode". Wolff observes: "How can" Dickinson "justify the wayes of God to men' or sing forth the 'honor' of God's name when His signs are deceits and His promises are belied by unending spectacles of death?" (Wolff 156). "Faith" seemed to her critical mind an "invention" while "Microscopes are prudent / In an Emergency" (185). Her attitude to the Bible also deserves attention in this context. The Bible was her best-known text. Yet Dickinson never regarded it with traditional reverence

as a repository of eternal truth. It served her, as Cristanne Miller aptly argues, as “a lexicon” (Miller 131). The compact and terse language of the Bible served her well as an ideal stylistic model. Miller proves with profuse illustrations how Dickinson’s unusual stylistic features show close parallels with the Bible’s syntactic and lexical features. However, Dickinson can ignore all conventional religious notions and dares to write that “The Bible was an antique Volume / written by faded Men/ At the suggestion of Holy spectres - ” (1545). For her, it is a “Tale”: capitalisation only serves to emphasize her rebellion against the received ideas. It is a story of “Eden”, “Satan”, “David” and of boys who “believe” and other “Boys” who are “lost”. This rebellious stance culminates in the final lines with its slant criticism of a cold and stern God who fails to be a sweet and fascinating “Teller” as Orpheus was :

Had but the Tale a warbling Teller –
 All the boys would come –
 Orpheus' Sermon captivated –
 It did not condemn – (1545)

Her difference from the conventionally religious is expressed here in no uncertain terms.

Dickinson's poems dealing with religious ideas may be divided into three distinct groups : poems dealing with death, poems on heaven and God and poems about immortality. It is true that her poems on death do not always show explicit religious questioning. But the subtle play of irony and scepticism in her best death poems shatters all orthodox consolations about death as a gateway to heaven and immortality. “Because I could not stop for Death” (712), for instance, begins almost romantically with the poet’s journey with Death as a kind, almost a romantic suitor, offering a ride. The first two lines deftly conceal the terror of death as the poem begins :

Because I could not stop for Death –
 He kindly stopped for me –

The fifth stanza, however, shatters the illusion of a romantic journey narrated in the earlier stanzas :

We paused before a House that seemed
 A Swelling of the Ground –
 The Roof was scarcely visible –
 The Cornice - in the Ground –

At the end of the journey there is only a cold tomb - "A Swelling of the Ground". The poet sees nothing beyond the darkness of death. There is not even the slightest hint of immortality or any heavenly association. Rather, the description of the living and dynamic earth, when viewed from the perspective of the cold tomb in the last stanza, imparts a kind of quiet pathos in the scene described :

We passed the School, where Children strove
 At Recess in the Ring –
 We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
 We passed the Setting Sun –

Affection for the vitality of this earthly life rather than any yearning for a heavenly after-life is implicitly suggested through the lines. The "School" where "Children" play "at Recess in the Ring", "the fields of Gazing Grain" and finally "the Setting Sun"-all the commonplaces of earthly life seem to be far more attractive than the journey with a supposed romantic suitor. Two other remarkable poems – "I heard a Fly buzz-when I died" (465) and "Safe in their Alabaster Chamber" (216) also deny belief in immortality and negate all orthodox consolations for death (discussed in detail in the fourth chapter). The negation of the Christian notions about death also underlies the description of a dying person in no. 547. The poet watches the dying eye to find out the flicker of any divine light. But the persona dies without disclosing any such thing :

I've seen a Dying Eye
 Run round and round a Room –

In search of Something – as it seemed

.....
 And then - be soldered down

Without disclosing what it be

'T were blessed to have seen - (547)

Owing to this absence of the consolatory Christian faith, Dickinson sees death only as a dark, unfathomable mystery. Death is to her also loss of human power and energy. Death is lifelessness as opposed to life, which, in her vision, is synonymous with power: "To be alive-is Power" (677). The stillness after the death of a busy housewife in "How many times these low feet staggered" (187) emphasizes this sense of waste. The lady is no longer there. So

Buzz the dull flies-on the Chamber window -

Brave-shines the sun through the freckled pane-

Fearless-the cobweb swings from the ceiling -

Indolent Housewife - in Daisies - Lain! (187)

Simple domestic details never to be taken up by the dead housewife speak of death that destroys life and activity.

So no romantic wishfulness and no religious belief in immortality, but a despairing sense of mystery is the dominating perspective on death in her poetry. And what emerges finally from her death poems is a fond love for the earthly existence of human beings. This vision of death is something very unique against the vision of death in contemporary poetry marked either by romantic or by Christian perspective.

Negation and doubt dominate Dickinson's poems on heaven also. In a number of these poems she offers conventional picture of heaven with a quiet irony that negates the apparently innocent descriptions. Besides, her notion of heaven as visualised in some of the poems also sharply rejects the idealized version of heaven in the popular consolation literature of the time. Ann Douglas describes in detail how consolation literature developed a concept of heaven as

the idealized version of the familiar earth and thereby domesticated the fear of death. Poems and fictions gave intimate and literal domestic details of heaven to comfort the bereaved that “nothing is lost in death” (Douglas 224). Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's “Gates Ajar” is the apotheosis of the consolation literature of the day. Dickinson, however, offers no such sentimental solace for death. Rather, she shatters the ideas about heaven propagated by both the orthodox beliefs and the consolation literature. For instance, no. 374 paints a very literal picture of heaven. It is a “small Town-lit with a Ruby-/ Lathed-with Down –”. The extreme literalness of the description, however, destroys the authenticity of the picture. The apparently innocent portrayal in the next stanza betrays the imperfection of this heaven to a perceptive reader :

Stiller-than the fields
At the full Dew –
Beautiful – as pictures —
No Man drew. (374)

This beautiful heaven is like life-less “pictures” lacking the vitality of her preferred earth. Finally, the attitude of indeterminacy and ambivalence in the final lines – “Almost-contented / I-could be-/ 'Mong such unique/ society–” also exposes her dissatisfaction with the sentimental notions about heaven usually found in the consolation literature. No less iconoclastic is the perception of heaven as an illusory promise in sharp contrast to the orthodox beliefs. She tells us ironically that “Heaven beguiles the tired / As the Brooks in deserts babbles sweet / on ear too far for the delight” (121). No. 489, however, shows her ironical dig at the smug confidence of believers who “prate of Heaven” and “relate-when Neighbours die/ And at what o'clock to Heaven – they fled –”. The use of the word “prate” makes clear her satirical intentions. The next stanza gives up this ironical stance. It directly questions this naive faith in the existence of a supposed heaven: “Is Heaven a Place-a Sky-a Tree ?” (489) and juxtaposes this scepticism with her melancholy conviction that “Location's narrow way is for Ourselves”:

Unto the Dead

There's no Geography – (489)

Irony is her telling weapon also to suggest her doubt about “going to Heaven” as the believers suppose:

Going to Heaven!

I don't know when –

Pray do not ask me how!

Indeed I'm too astonished

To think of answering you! (79)

However, in the next stanzas, under the impact of intense feeling, irony is transformed into angry refusal to accept this dominant lie about going to heaven. The stark reality of death shows itself in “I'm glad I don't believe it/For it would stop my breath”. The next two lines articulate her passionate fondness for this earth :

And I'd like to look a little more

At such a curious Earth! (79)

She is certain that she “shall not feel at home in the handsome skies” (413) and declares decisively “I don't like Paradise –” (413). Heaven seems inferior to her preferred earth :

Because it's Sunday – all the time

And Recess – never comes” – (413)

She is afraid of the passivity and the loneliness of heaven :

And Eden 'll be so lonesome

Bright Wednesday Afternoons – (413)

Her personal correspondences also demonstrate her longing for this earth. Revealing her preference for the earthly world, she writes to Susan Dickinson: “–this is but Earth, yet Earth so like to heaven, that I would hesitate, should the

true one call away" (Letters Vol. I:195). With equal enthusiasm she negates the sublimity of heaven in her letter to Samuel Bowles : "The Charms of the Heaven in the bush are superceded, I fear, by the Heaven in the hand, occasionally" (Letters Vol. II:338). Her letter to Mrs. Holland also emphasizes her firm belief that Earth is Heaven : "Vinnie says you ... dwell in Paradise. I have never believed the latter to be a superhuman site" (Letters Vol. II:508). "Our old home", this "finite" earth (696), is ever present in her verse while heaven remains "the House of Supposition / The Glimmering Frontier that / Skirts the Acres of Perhaps-" (696). "I am sorry for the Dead Today-" (529) also touchingly reveals her yearning for this familiar earth. The poet pities the dead farmers and their wives, who, she is sure, are "homesick" for their "Sunburned Acquaintance", who "Discourse between the Toil - / And laugh, a homely species" / That makes the Fences smile -" (529). The poet wonders "if the Sepulchre" feels "lonesome" to them "when Men and Boys - and Carts and June / Go down the Fields to "Hay" (529). The poem, indeed, very successfully reverses the orthodox belief in heaven as our true home. To Dickinson, "Paradise" remains always a surmise, "an uncertain certainty" to be "inferred" by "it's Bisecting/ Messenger -" (1411).

This estrangement from orthodoxy, however, provokes her to seek a personally validated conception of heaven. Heaven means different "signs" to her (575). Sometimes nature's magnificence offers her a taste of heaven. She perceives heaven in the "look at dawn" that "settles in the Hills" or in the "Carnivals of Cloud" when "the Sun is on" (575). A glorious sunset or "the Rapture of a finished Day" is to her what "men call 'Paradise' " (575). Similarly, the cherubic voice of a bird also is an emblem of the heavenly quality of the earth :

The Robin is the One
 That overflow the Noon
 With her cherubic quantity -
 An April but begun - (828)

The idea of heaven also serves as a fitting symbol for what is transient, distant or inaccessible : "The Apple on the Tree--/ Provided it do hopeless-hang-" (239). In her more philosophical moments, heaven is after all a creation of the human mind :

'Tis vast - as our Capacity –
 As fair - as our idea –
 To Him of adequate desire
 No further 'tis, than-Here – (370)

Dickinson restates the idea in a slightly different manner in one of her prose fragments: "Paradise is no Journey because it is within - but for that very cause though it is the most Arduous of Journeys" (qtd. in Anderson 265). Thus, she rejects the idea of heaven as a definite locale as it seemed to her both naive and dogmatic. Rather, she employs heaven as a multifaceted symbol as the poems cited above demonstrate. This multidimensional idea of heaven in her poems marks them out from the contemporary poetry on the same subject.

Dickinson's poems on immortality, her "Flood subject" (Letters Vol. II:454), are equally distinctive. She wrote a few poems professing orthodox beliefs. But the lack of conviction evident in them makes them hardly interesting or impressive. The flatness of the poem cited below betrays this compromising stance :

If my Bark sink
 'Tis to another sea –
 Mortality's Ground Floor
 Is Immortality – (1234)

With her sceptical intelligence, it was very difficult for her to accept a literal belief in the orthodox notion of immortality. Doubt haunts her persistently at every critical juncture as her letter to Reverend Charles H Clark after his brother's death testifies: "Are you certain there is another life? When overwhelmed to know, I fear that few are sure" (Letters Vol. III: 779). Her famous letter to John Greaves best expresses her distrust of the conventional perception of

immortality:"It is a jolly thought to think that we can be eternal-when air and earth are full of lives that are gone and done-and a conceited thing indeed this promised resurrection" (Letters Vol. 2:328). She keenly feels that belief in immortality is a desperate psychological necessity for man in the face of death:

Immortal is an ample word
 When what we need is by
 But when it leaves us for a time
 'Tis a necessity. (1205)

Death compels us to believe in an after-life to compensate for the loss of loved ones :

Of Heaven above the firmest proof
 We fundamental know
 Except for its marauding Hand
 It had been Heaven below. (1205)

A number of poems on immortality betray her overtly rebellious stance under the veneer of conformity. The poet concedes that "it is an honourable Thought" that "we've immortal Place". However, the subtle irony in the verse that follows immediately subverts the proposition stated earlier :

.
 Though Pyramids decay
 And kingdoms, like the Orchard
 Flit Russetly away (946)

Similarly, no. 501 begins with a quiet assurance that there is a world beyond, a spiritual existence – "This world is not Conclusion". Yet as the poem advances, faith gradually weakens and "plucks at a twig of Evidence". Despite all preachings – "much Gesture from the Pulpit" – the gnawing doubt persists :

Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
 That nibbles at the soul – (501)

The very word “Narcotics” reminds one of Marx's opinion of religion as the opium of the soul. The nibbling “Tooth” as a telling image of the spiritual torment compares well with Herbert's description of inner conflict in “Affliction” in which he writes “My thoughts are all a case of knives”. Herbert, however, submits to faith finally while Dickinson sticks to her rejection of conventional faith in an after-life.

However, Dickinson discovers a philosophical way out perceiving immortality in the consciousness of man, and also in the moments of perfect bliss human beings enjoy in rare fleeting moments. For her, immortality is a timeless zone away from earthly flux – “whose even years / No solstice interrupt”- It is a domain of “perpetual Noon” and “perfect Seasons” immeasurable by human notion of time :

Whose Summer set in Summer, till
The Centuries of June
And Centuries of August Cease
And consciousness - is Noon. (1056)

Anderson opines that this poem offers us Dickinson's “transcendent vision of immortality” (Stairway of Surprise 282). Moments of perfect bliss and happiness are also symbols of infinity for her even though these moments cannot be permanent :

The soul has moments of Escape -
When bursting all the doors -
She dances like a Bomb, abroad -
And swings upon the Hours, (512)

But the realist in Dickinson knows that these transcendent hours cannot last in the imperfections and commonness of daily life :

Glory is that bright tragic thing
That for an instant
Means Dominion – (1660)

But her ultimate conclusion is that she had the "Glory" : "That will do/ An honour" (349). Achievement of this vision is a comfort and a transforming experience. So here is a new kind of faith at a great distance from the traditional doctrine of immortality.

Dickinson's poems on God also transcend conventional Christian verse. She perceives God in a variety of ways ranging from quiet belief to biting satire, from childlike devotion to angry rebellion. Her rejection of faith is not tantamount to a renunciation of the belief in God. In her own personal way, she is deeply religious. She writes with absolute conviction without her characteristic ambivalence or indeterminacy that "He exists / Somewhere in Silence / He has hid his rare life / From our gross eyes" (338). She is equally certain that "All circumstances are the Frame / In which His face is set" (820). What she rejects is the optimistic interpretation of God's character as a loving and benevolent heavenly father as is ordained by the scriptures. Her experience of the human world ravaged by disease and death negates such a belief. Almost blasphemously for a woman of New England upbringing, she ponders over God's guilt. She calls Him "Burglar – Banker – Father!" (49) when her friend dies. God is a "sneering mighty Merchant" in "I asked no other thing" (621). In her view, God is generally indifferent to human desires and even to life :

The Perished Patterns murmur
 But His Perturbless Plan
 Proceed – inserting Here – a Sun
 There – leaving out a Man – (724)

God is "jealous" (Letters Vol. II: 512) of human happiness like a child "who cannot bear to see / That we had rather not with Him/ But with each other play" (1719). God also approves "Frost", a "Blonde Assassin" beheading flowers with repeated "accidental" exercise of his "power" (1624). Dickinson also frequently uses legal and economic terminology to demonstrate God's untrustworthiness as a judge. In "Alone and in a Circumstances" (1167) she accuses God of an

injustice far worse than any humankind :

.
 If any take my property
 According to the Law
 The Statute is my Learned friend
 But what redress can be
 For an offence not here nor there
 So not in Equity –
 That Larceny of time and mind
 The marrow of the Day
 By spider, or forbid it Lord
 That I should specify (1167)

To this indifferent God, "Creation" is "the Gamble of His Authority-" (724). He hardly cares for human prayers :

Of course I prayed
 And did God Care ? (376)

In her more sceptical moments, she finds God fully unavailable and ultimately absent. God is a power behind the "Cloud / If any power behind it, be," (293).

Anguished by God's remoteness, Dickinson almost denies His existence :

His house was not-no sign had He
 By Chimney – nor by Door
 Could I infer his Residence –
 Vast Prairies of Air
 unbroken by a Settler –
 were all that I could see –
 Infinitude – Had'st Thou no Face
 That I might look on Thee ? (564)

Sometimes, she deftly uses the naivety and innocence of her child persona to

make her attack on God. The child in 1201 flippantly disobeys God :

So I pull my Stockings off
 Wading in the Water
 For the Disobedience' Sake
 (1201)

In another, a child prays for her share of heaven to God :

Great spirit – Give to me
 A Heaven not so large as yours,
 But large enough – for me – (476)

But the irony in the next quartains gradually exposes the duplicity of God. The candid child believes that "Whatsoever ye shall ask-/Itself be given you". God is amused at the simplicity of the girl who believes seriously in prayer :

A Smile suffused Jehovah's face –
 The Cherubim – withdrew –
 Grave Saints stole out to look at me
 And showed their dimples - too- (476)

The poet tells us in the next quartain that the angry child stops her prayer and leaves the place :

I left the Place, with all my might –
 I threw my Prayer away –

The child, grown adult in the final stanza, denounces God for his malice:

But I, grown shrewder-scan the Skies
 with a suspicious Air-
 As children –swindled for the first
 All Swindlers – be – infer – (476)

The term "swindler" suggests a cruel God who betrays His children. Sometimes, her anger and despair are so keen that she portrays a God who is nothing short of a hypocrite :

We are dust –
 We apologize to thee
 For thine own Duplicity – (1461)

To Dickinson this unconcerned God plays hide and seek with man :

'Tis an instant's play
 'Tis a fond ambush – (338)

But man's despairing search for this inaccessible God only proves to be a “too expensive jest” :

Would not the fun
 Look too expensive !
 Would not the jest –
 Have crawled too far ! (338)

So God in her poems does not seem “all love” as in George Herbert's “Evening Song”

However, Dickinson's sacrilegious view of God turned her into an outsider amid her believing community and caused her all the agony that goes with that identity. Without any settled conviction –“standing alone in rebellion”- she is often gripped by panic : “I am far from the land” (qtd. in Gelpi 34). Gelpi argues that recurrent metaphors of “sea-voyages, drowning, shipwreck and safe harbour” employed in various contexts articulate this sense of anxiety and fear (The Mind of Emily Dickinson 34). In some of her best poems also, we notice her yearning for belief and her sense of despair for her insuperable sense of cosmic alienation. This spiritual dilemma finds a telling expression in “These are the days when Birds come back” (130). The summer like beauty of late-Autumn pervades the first two stanzas :

.
 These are the days when skies resume
 The old-old sophistries of June –
 A blue and gold mistake.

This “blue and gold mistake” almost “induces” her “belief” in the permanence of summer :

Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee -
 Almost thy plausibility
 Induces my belief. (130)

The testimony of nature tempts her to believe in immortality despite contrary evidence of her reason. The final stanza poignantly articulates her child like yearning for a union with nature:

Oh Sacrament of summerdays,
 Oh last Communion in the Haze -
 Permit a child to join.

The use of religious words such as “sacrament”, “immortal” “communion” in a non-religious context demonstrates the intensity of her desire for a faith opposed by her uncompromising intellect. Perhaps, through this desire for identification with the beauty of nature, she wishes to enjoy serenity and ecstasy which unquestioning faith offers.

In another, she dreams of a time when there are only “Certainties of Sun/ Midsummer - in the Mind” / “A steadfast South – upon the Soul” (646). This vision of tranquil certainty, “pondered long”, becomes “so plausible” that she imagines the “fiction” real and “the Real-fictitious seems” (646). No less touching is her painful feeling that “To lose one’s faith - surpass / The loss of an Estate / Because Estates can be / Replenished -faith cannot” (377). The lack of a vigorous and sustaining faith leads her sometimes to near-desperation. Without faith, ‘Being’s Beggary” (377). She even thinks for a moment that “The abdication of Belief Makes the Behaviour small -” :

Better an ignis fatuus
 Than no illume at all - (1551)

The agonized sense of fear and alienation that afflicted her, owing to her denial of faith, reveals itself subtly, but in no less a telling manner in “I saw no way-The

Heavens were stiched" (378). Shut away from the gates of heaven, and abandoned by her dear earth, the poet finds "no Way":

I touched the Universe—
And back it slid – and I alone – (378)

Without the shelter of received religion, she is terribly alone in an infinite space:

A Speck upon a Ball
Went out upon Circumference
Beyond the dip of Bell – (378)

"Beyond the dip of Bell" perhaps signifies her distance from the traditional religion.

This sense of anxiety frequently shows through very subtly in some poems which are open to various interpretations. For instance, she yearns for the steadfast company of the "Sweet Mountain" in 722:

Sweet Mountains – ye tell Me no lie –
Never deny Me – Never fly –
Those same unvarying Eyes
Turn on Me-when I fail or feign, . . . (722)

Her reference to herself as "Way ward Nun" (722) is her way of indicating that she has repudiated the organized religion in favour of the alternative religion of poetry. Her plea "Never deny Me–Never fly", we may interpret, reveals her keen desire for the steady vision she has lost through her apostasy. Dickinson's poems on religion thus occupy a distinctive place among the tradition of religious poetry in general and make a very interesting reading in their dramatic revelation of the varying and contradictory moods of her mind.

In the ultimate analysis, Dickinson the poet is born out of the rebel. Her creativity taught her not to give up her sense of truth even though it caused an ever present sense of estrangement and loneliness. Comparable to Blake in her passion for individuality, she followed her lonely pilgrimage with experiential

reality as her only prop. She was determined to win her “crown” not through surrender of her self but “through the assertion of self in golden lines of her verse” (Wolff 132). She considered words extremely powerful and valued human language, “this loved philology”, much more than the divine word. In one of her best-known poems, Dickinson celebrates the glory of human language by contrasting God's word with human “Philology”:

A word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die (1651)

God's word cannot die : “It may expire if He- / 'Made Flesh and dwelt among us”. But the poet feels that “could condescension be / Like this consent of Language / This loved Philology” (1651). Cristanne Miller, in this context, observes in Emily Dickinson: Poet's Grammar (1987) that “here conditional 'Could' calls into question whether divine language is capable of the service human language routinely performs” (177). Adrienne Rich, one of the early -twentieth-century feminist poets and a great admirer of Dickinson, also points to the intense significance of word in Dickinson's mind as an emblem of the sustaining power.

Rich writes about Dickinson in a poem :

You woman, masculine
In singlemindedness,
For whom the word was more
Than a symptom –
A condition of being

(Necessities of Life 33)

To Dickinson, power of words is often beyond human perception also:

Could mortal lip divine
The undeveloped Freight
Of a delivered syllable

'T would crumble with the weight. (1409)

With faith in this extraordinary power of language, Dickinson chooses the vocation of a poet. Poets, she tells us, "illuminate" with their mastery over words. They "go out", but the "wicks" they "stimulate" cause a vital light to "inhere" to them. The range and influence of the poets can be limitless:

.. . . .
 If vital Light
 Inhere as do the Suns -
 Each Age a Lens-
 Disseminating their
 Circumference (883)

She would "compete with death" through her verse, which counters her sense of isolation also:

The fellow cannot touch this Crown

 No wilderness -can be
 Where this attendeth me - (195)

Language helped her to create an alternative religion of poetry that "Comprehend the Whole" (569). Cynthia Griffin Wolff rightly observes that "with the 'breath' of her verse she would vie with the God of Genesis who had breathed life unto dust and made man" (Wolff 151). The vocation of poetry finally provided her access to her own personal world far worth having for her than the world of conventional religion.

CHAPTER-IV

A POET APART

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A Poet Apart

Dickinson's poetry fairly reveals her awareness of the contemporary tendencies. A number of recent critics build upon her links with the literary and socio-cultural contexts of her time. Jay Leyda in his The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson (1960) observes that Dickinson was "much more involved in the conflicts and tensions of her nation and community than we have thought" (XIX-XX). Barton Levy St. Armand in Emily Dickinson and Her Culture (1984) discovers her affinities with the sentimental and aesthetic writers of her time. More recently, Judith Farr in The Passions of Emily Dickinson (1992) traces the painterly sources from Europe and America as possible inspiration for many of her poems. Cynthia Griffin Wolff also explores her poetry in terms of the intellectual and spiritual tendencies of her age in her intensive study, Emily Dickinson (1986). All these studies have certainly widened our knowledge of the poet in her contemporary context. Yet Dickinson's originality transcends all her sources. Speaking about the qualitative gap between her "gathered material" and their transformation, Ronald Hagenbüchle comments that it is a "real quantum leap" (Emily Dickinson Hand Book 369). Her approach to the content and technique of poetry is so strikingly individual that she seems to be shockingly original beside poets like William Bryant, John Whittier or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the gentle romantics of the early-nineteenth-century America. She may be bracketed with Edgar Allan Poe whose art also negates the optimistic transcendentalism that dominated the era. Yet her perceptions of life, sceptical and transcendent at the same time, are too distinctively her own without any parallel in the whole of nineteenth-century American literature. She is even radically different from Emerson and Whitman. Emerson and Whitman too challenge the contemporary poetic conventions. But Dickinson goes even further. She creates an individual poetic idiom of her own. A brief discussion of Emerson's

and Whitman's poetic philosophy and style is necessary at this point to bring out the identity in difference between them on the one hand and Dickinson on the other.

Emerson's views of life and art were shaped by his transcendentalism. An aggressive faith in the power of the individual self, an offshoot of his transcendentalism, and a mystic belief in the spirituality of nature and in the harmonious union of the human and the divine are the focal points of all his discourse and poetry. He passionately celebrates the autonomy and the possibilities of the human self in "Self-Reliance" (1841): "What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think" (The Portable Emerson 143). For him, "To believe in your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men- that is genius" (ibid 138). This insistence on the need for self-reliance and self-trust runs through the pages not only of "Self-Reliance" but recurs in his "Divinity School Address" (1838) and "American Scholar" (1837). His essay "Circles" pays tribute to man's never-ending possibilities of growth. Emerson here proposes that onwardness and movement, not stasis, is the "Lord of Life": "The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles and that without end" (The Portable Emerson 230). Emerson rejects historical Christianity. However, as an ardent transcendentalist, he believes that the divine pervades every atom of the creation: "World is the product of one will, of one mind; and that one mind is everywhere active, in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool" ("An Address" in An Emerson Reader 191). His conviction about the divinity of the human self is the inspiration behind his passionate advocacy of self-reliance: "The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure that it is profane to seek to interpose helps" (The Portable Emerson 150). Emerson's various writings illustrate the fact that he thinks both the "finite" and the "infinite", temporal and "immutable" combine in man. His vision of nature is also influenced by his romantic-idealistic philosophy. Like the

romantics, specially reminiscent of Wordsworth, Emerson spiritualizes nature and finds it full of moral meanings for man. He observes in "Nature" (1836) that "particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts" and "the moral law lies at the centre of nature" (The Portable Emerson 19 and 29). He believes that nature rather than tradition or authority is our best teacher. The beauty of nature "sober and heal us" ("Nature" in Essays 328). In "Woodnotes" he proclaims that nature also purges man of sin:

Come, lay thee in my soothing shade
and heal the hurt which
Sin has made.

The poem also suggests that nature is ever faithful to those who "trust" her. For Emerson, nature is a "metaphor of the human mind" and the "symbol of spirit" (Portable Emerson 24, 19). To him, universe represents the externalization of the human soul. In Emerson's idealistic scheme of things, nature is no mysterious stranger. It elevates human soul, and ultimately man and nature are harmonious parts of a greater organic unity, the "perfect whole" as he calls it in the poem "Each and All".

We should not suppose that Emerson was naively unaware of the limitations and vulnerability of the human self. "Experience" and "Conduct of Life", his most important later essays, demonstrate his anguished consciousness of evil, of man's powerlessness before fate and death despite his affirmation of life. Stephen Whicher in his famous book Freedom and Fate : An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1953) emphasizes Emerson's awareness of the limitations of optimism. However, Emerson remains ultimately an optimist as he privileges the positive over the negative in human life. In his late essay "Perpetual Forces", Emerson observes that "We see the cause of evils and learn to parry them and use them as instruments" (The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson 10:73). He retains his belief in the power of the imagination "to rise" above

despondency and conquer the conditions of life.

Glorification of the self is also the hallmark of Whitman's poetry. The very first lines of "Song of Myself" emphasize the heroic dimension of the human self :

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume.

(Leaves of Grass 28)

Like Emerson, he also conceives this individual self not as an isolated entity but as united with all human beings from "victim to the murderer" (Cambon 27). "Solitary at midnight", he walks in his imagination on "the old hills of Judaea with the beautiful gentle God by my side" (Leaves of Grass 64). A visionary desire for connecting personal self with everything and everyone is the focus of Leaves of Grass. "Like a noiseless patient spider" that "launch'd for filament, filament out of itself", his soul yearns to unite with every manifestation of life and divinity "till the gossamer thread it flings" catches "somewhere" ("A Noiseless Patient Spider", Leaves of Grass 450). This insistence on the spiritual ties between the self and the world recurs throughout "Song of Myself":

I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I an encloser of things
to be.

(Leaves of Grass 80)

Whitman stands on the same ground with Emerson in his poetic perception of life and the world.

Emily Dickinson, however, sees the world very differently from these two of her most outstanding contemporaries. Her poetry projects two worlds: one celebrating the invincible power of the soul and the other in the throes of pain, terror, doubt, despair and alienation. Accordingly, the celebrant and the nihilist exist side by side in her art. Her poems deal with all the commonplaces like love, death, religion, nature etc. But she rethinks them for herself, uninfluenced by

tradition and authority. Speaking about Dickinson's originality, Harold Bloom writes in The Western Canon: "Except for Shakespeare, Dickinson manifests more cognitive originality than any other western poet since Dante" (291). He finds only Blake comparable to her in this respect.

Undeniably, Dickinson's aggressive individualism and independence of mind is to a great extent the result of the Emersonian tradition. Dickinson never met Emerson in person though she had the opportunity to meet him when he stayed in her brother's house during a lecture tour in Amherst in 1857. Anyway, she remained a reader of Emerson throughout her life. Emily Fowler Ford, Dickinson's girlhood friend, remarked that "Dickinson was immersed in Emerson's essays in the mid-1840s." (Porte and Morris, Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson 175). In 1850 Benjamin Newton, her beloved "tutor", had given her a copy of the 1847 poems (Letters Vol. I: 85). Critics such as George Whicher, Austin Warren and Roy Harvey Pearce find close link between the two poets. Clark Griffith also considers Dickinson a "Post-Emersonian" (Simon and Parsons, Transcendentalism and Its Legacy 124). Perhaps Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance and his trust in the power of the individual self fostered her own faith in the creative energy and the sustaining power of her own psyche. A number of poems such as no 383 ("Exhilaration is within"), no. 713 ("Fame of myself to justify") and no. 384 ("No rack can torture me") amply illustrate her faith in her consciousness as an alternative source of power. One of the most revealing is 789 in which Dickinson intends to rely on the power of the "Columnar Self" instead of on God or on external nature:

On a Columnar Self -

How ample to rely

In Tumult or extremity - (789)

The trust in self sustains her "Conviction"; that "Granitic Base / Though None be on our Side" (789). As for Emerson, for her also, "Exhilaration – is within-/ There can no Outer Wine / So royally intoxicate / As that Diviner Brand/ The

Soul achieves – Herself" (383). Her faith in the sustaining power of the self is so profound that she unhesitatingly proclaims: "The Soul selects her own Society - / Then – shuts the Door".

Despite such Emersonian glorification of the individual self, Dickinson was clearly sceptical of unqualified optimism. After her denial to hear Emerson's lecture or visit him at her brother's residence at Amherst, Dickinson wrote to Susan Dickinson, her sister-in-law, about his visit: "It must have been as if he had come from where dreams are born!" (Letters Vol. III:913). Helen Mcneil observes that this phrase appears in a poem — "A precious – mouldering – pleasure – 'tis –" (371) where it refers to an antique bookseller:

He traverses-familiar -
As One should come to Town -
And tell you all your Dreams - were true -
He lived where Dreams were born - (371)

In the context of the poem, Dickinson's supposed praise of Emerson in the letter cited seems rather ironical. Mcneil comments that the phrase refers to Emerson as a "kind of travelling salesman of optimism" (Emily Dickinson 100).

Dickinson's individuality lies, however, in her ability to see beyond the Emersonian vision of an invincible self another world of vulnerability, negation and doubt that also haunt the human self. Her poetry makes us feel that the self that sustains often has its demoniac counterpart and anticipates much of the findings about divided self in modern psychology. She is also acutely aware of the limitations of the self. Some of her best poems demonstrate with an almost clinical precision her dark vision of the soul's terror of pain, despair and fragmentation – a vision that reminds one of Kierkegaard's vision of reality. One such poem of formidable intensity is no. 761—"From Blank to Blank—". The first stanza presents the indifference of the agonized self to terror and hopelessness:

From Blank to Blank -
A Threadless Way

I pushed Mechanic feet –

The last two lines of the first stanza focus on the deep sense of despair with telling intensity:

To stop or perish — or advance –

Alike indifferent –

Finally, the “end”, she gained, “ends beyond / Indefinite disclosed —”. This is no nineteenth-century poem but almost a post-modern one demonstrating the cool purposelessness of despair. Two of her best poems also portray in a telling manner the self in the aftermath of acute despair. She explores the physical and emotional shock the self undergoes after intense suffering in “After great pain” (341). “After great pain,” the poet feels, “The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs —”. The whole physical system goes into a state of paralyzed shock :

The Feet, Mechanical, go round —

Of Ground, or Air or Ought —

A wooden way

Regardless grown,

A Quartz contentment, like a stone — (341)

Such a physical and psychic state, the poet defines as the “Hour of Lead” which the soul, that can survive this agonized state, remembers :

As Freezing persons, recollect the snow —

First chill-then stupor-then the letting go (341)

I felt a “Funeral in my Brain” (280) (discussed in detail in the next chapter) is another remarkable poem on psychic distress. Along with the poems analysed above, it questions the Emersonian concept of the mind as “eternal” “supreme” and “absolute”(Frothingham 238). Formidable also is her cool and detached exploration of the nature of pain that often engulfs a distressed soul in no.599. The suffering is so intense that it swallows the self :

There is a pain – so utter –

It swallows substance up –

The mind, in its pathetic effort to recover, as if, covers the “Abyss” with “Trance”.

The last four lines depict the conscious delusion of the self to withstand the intense pressure of agony :

So Memory can step
 Around - across - upon it –
 As one within a Swoon –
 Goes safely - where an open eye
 would drop Him - Bone by Bone. (599)

Harold Bloom finds such poems almost Kafkaesque in their intensity : “Except for Kafka I cannot think of any writer who has expressed desperation as powerfully and as constantly as Dickinson” (Western Canon 295).

Some of her poems are also extremely interesting in their exploration of the fragmentation and duality of the self, revealing unbelief in a single unitary self. The agony of a split self, the consciousness of an other within the self, is the focus of poem 642. The poet's self is “impregnable unto All Heart”. But she cannot banish consciousness, the other “me”, from her self :

And since we're mutual Monarch
 How this be
 Except by Abdication —
 Me — of Me ? (642)

Soul is perceived in another poem as an “imperial friend” and also as an “agonizing Spy at the same time :

The soul unto itself
 Is an imperial friend-
 Or the most agonizing Spy-
 An Enemy-could send- (683)

Dickinson is also keenly aware of the destructive potentiality of the self, an awareness that goes far beyond the nineteenth-century conception of the self. Almost with a gothic imagination, she conceives "an assassin" within the self, "far more terrible" than the one hidden in a haunted house :

Ourself behind ourself, concealed –
 Should startle most –
 Assassin hid in our Apartment
 Be Horror's least. (670)

The other self, the awful internal stranger, can appear in the "Corridors" of the "Brain". It is more frightful than any external horror. To the poet, even a "midnight meeting" with the "External Ghost" is "far safer" than an encounter with the stranger in the interior of the mind. She can visualize the frightening power of the unconscious buried within "The Cellars of the Soul":

Its Hour with itself
 The Spirit never shows,
 What Terror would enthrall the Street
 Could countenance disclose

 The Subterranean Freight
 The Cellars of the Soul . . . (1225)

Thus she explores with a rare psychological accuracy otherness in identity, the self that is both a light and an engulfing darkness. Very often, as noticed in the poems discussed above, her poems combine the concept of an all-powerful invincible self with that of a self which is vulnerable, disintegrated and often potentially destructive. Stressing this point, Robert Weisbuch thinks that this perception of the dual character of consciousness reflects her composite mind, her attempt to explore experience as a whole. This awareness of the dialectical character of human self brings her close to modern sensibility.

Dickinson's uniqueness as a poet rests largely on her nature poetry also. She is considered to be one of the greatest American Romantics. Yet, Unlike the British and the American Romantics, Dickinson never spiritualizes nature or finds any moral or ethical value for man as does Emerson. Nature to her is no divinity. She cannot accept the popular belief that nature illustrates God's design for man and symbolizes immortality. The cyclical aspect of nature suggests to her the passage of time rather than eternity and resurrection (discussed with examples in chapter 6). The singularity of her nature poetry lies in its insistence on the separation between man and nature. Mystery of nature remains as the mystery of God, ever unknown and incomprehensible :

Nature and God — I neither knew (835)

In her experience, the mysterious forces of nature are often oppressive. The light that falls on the "Winter Afternoons" oppresses like the "Heft of Cathedral Tunes". It is an "imperial affliction" that gives us "Heavenly Hurt" though "We can find no scar" (258). So Dickinson, unlike Emerson and other romantic poets, feels an antagonistic relationship between the self and the other as symbolized in external nature instead of a harmonious interrelation.

Dickinson's original language use is now-a-days a commonplace of Dickinson criticism. Language of her verse, almost idiosyncratically individual in the context of her age, separates her from her compeers. Critics like Jack L. Capps and Robert E. Spiller, however, find some similarities between her style and Emerson's gnomic style. Capps writes: "She seems to be unaware of the way in which the poetic materials that she gleaned from "Emerson" appeared in her own verse" (Emily Dickinson's Reading118-119). Spiller remarks that "It is Emerson to whom she was most indebted for staccato forms and also for the bright courage of her terse speech" (The Literary History of the United States Vol. II: 909-10). But the worlds of their poetry are poles apart at a deeper level. Dickinson defies all conventional grammatical norms and often uses words and

images almost surrealistic in character. Her poems possess very little communicative transparency. Her language is her extreme effort to conceptualize or communicate the subtle complexity of her self and its mysterious, estranging vision of the universe. So her poems were puzzling to her contemporary readers and pose problems for her modern readers also. Commenting on Dickinson's supposed affinities with Emerson, David Porter observes in his famous work Modern Idiom (1981):

... Seeing likenesses between them is to judge on the superficial evidences of formal brevity, partial rhymes, stock ideas of compensation, and shared tropes, and to miss the deepest and contrary realities of their disposition towards experience and the disparity of their languages that perceived these different worlds.

(Porter 171-172).

It is this "disposition towards experience that separates her not only from Emerson but from all her contemporaries.

It is imperative to compare Dickinson with Whitman for a proper evaluation of her distinction as a poet. They never met or read each other's work. Dickinson was told that Whitman's book was disgraceful, and she never read it (Letters Vol.II: 404). Whitman might have known her, but only seven of her poems were published during her lifetime. The remaining poems, close to eighteen hundred, were published after her death just before Whitman died. But both the poets are outstandingly original in the context of their literary scene. Leaves of Grass, in its first publication, was almost shockingly unfamiliar to its early readers and reviewers. The book was denounced as a gathering of "muck", a "mass of stupid filth", etc. (Zweig 266). He was even scarcely regarded as a poet at all (Willard 131). George Saintsbury writes : "A page of his work has little or no look of poetry about it because he produced a new kind of literature which we may or may not allow to be poetry" (qtd.in Leaves of Grass 788). Emily Dickinson was also barely published in her lifetime. The few poems published were also

considered 'not poetry' by the representative literary critics of the time. Her unmatched originality was ungraspable by her contemporary and by the later critics also up to 1920s.

Both the poets shared many attitudes that were significant in their creative lives. Both of them viewed individual self as the creative centre of the universe, but their dealings with the self diverged to widely different destinations. Both of them tended to see poetry as replacing religion. The seriousness and the dignity of their poetry rest upon their expectations that art would rescue them from chaos and purposelessness. For Whitman, the "poet must replace the priest" (qtd.in Salaska 24). Whitman also observes in the preface to November Boughs (1888): "No one will get at my verse who insists upon viewing them as literary performance or aiming mainly toward art and aestheticism". Dickinson also turned to poetry for psychic sustenance. In her letter to Higginson, she reveals the innermost motive of her poetry :

I had a terror-since September - I could tell to none and so I
sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground because I am
afraid - (Letters Vol. II:404)

Yet the differences are many and far more fundamental than the affinities between the two poets. Whitman, as everyone agrees, fulfils Emerson's vision of a representative poet. Whitman's poetic persona in Leaves of Grass is "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a Kosmos ... no stander above men and women or apart from them" (Leaves of Grass 52). undoubtedly, Leaves of Grass is a drama of the soul, an intensely subjective poem. In his 1876 preface Whitman defines it as a kind of "autobiography". At the same time, it is also a public poem, celebrating his vision of the newly emerging America — a vision that combines transcendence and practical reality. In the same preface of 1876, Whitman identifies the growth of Leaves of Grass with the growth of his country: "... within my time the United States have emerged from nebulous vagueness and suspense, to full orbic (though varied) decision, ... out of that stretch of

time...my poems too have found genesis "(Introduction, Leaves of Grass XXX). Whitman's poetry is thus a unique combination of the lyric self with the world outside and the universe:

One's-self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

("Inscriptions", Leaves of Grass 1)

The inscription of Leaves of Grass clearly reveals his literary nationalism:

I heard that you ask'd for something to prove this puzzle the New
World,
And to define America, her athletic Democracy
Therefore I send you my poems that you behold in them what
you wanted.

("To Foreign Lands", Leaves of Grass 3)

Sacvan Bercovitch appropriately observes in this respect : "The American hero fuses universal virtues with the qualities of national leadership and together they define him as a prophetic exemplar of the country" (The Puritan Origins of the American Self 149). Leaves of Grass conforms to this pattern and places Whitman in the context of national literature. The lyric poet and the epic bard co-exist in Whitman. He is never alienated from the surrounding world, from America and its people. His poetry like a camera ranges through the external world and captures the essential unity of the world despite its diversity. He is "of the old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise, ..." ("Song of Myself", Leaves of Grass 44). He is "maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man ... At home on Canadian snow-shoes or up in the bush, or with fishermen off New foundland." ("Song of Myself", Leaves of Grass 45). The identification goes on endless and the poet finally proclaims :

Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,

A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,
 Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.

(Leaves of Grass 45)

Whitman sees himself in "all people" and "the good or bad I say of myself I say of them" (Leaves of Grass 47). "Song of Myself" is thus the song of all men in all ages. It is boundlessly inclusive.

Dickinson, along with Whitman, stands at the centre of the American literary canon. Harold Bloom unhesitatingly claims : "No western poet, in the past century and a half, not even Browning or Leopardi or Baudelaire overshadows Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson" (Western Canon 265). However, Dickinson's individuality as a poet in the context of the other outstanding literary artists of the time including Whitman rests largely on the intensely private character of her poetry. She starts from the experiences of the private self and discovers the world in the inner space of her soul. She is no representative American poet like Whitman. She lived in a secluded world of her own, cut off from the external world both physically and psychologically. In her own words, "The Soul selects her own Society — / Then - shuts the Door" (303). Recent emphasis on cultural studies since 1970s, however, grounds Dickinson in her particular historical and cultural context and tries to find newer perspectives in her poetic response to her contemporary time and place. Benjamin Lease in her Emily Dickinson's Readings of Men and Books (1990) Comments on Dickinson's "passionate involvement with family, with friends, with a cultural legacy of rebellion against orthodox answers to the religious questions of her time" (XII). Paula Bennett in Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet (1990), and Joanne Dobson in Strategies of Reticence 1989) place her in the context of her nineteenth-century feminine culture and explore the impact of that culture upon her poetics. Barton St. Armand in his Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society (1984) discovers significant affinities between Dickinson's poetry and the popular subcultures of her time present in women's scrapbooks, contemporary journals,

folk culture and landscape painting. In Emily Dickinson : A Voice of War (1985), Sara Woolsey tries to demonstrate that Dickinson's poetry "can be seen as profoundly engaged in problems of the external world and aggressively so" (qtd.in Emily Dickinson Hand Book 39). These scholars want to establish that Dickinson was quite aware of the public of her day and knew about the world through her reading and correspondences and that her poetry is also significantly impacted by this knowledge. Arguments of these scholars possess sufficient substance. Yet even a casual reading of her verse amply shows that cultural or environmental influences undergo such a thorough transformation in her poetry that her verse goes far beyond her immediate era, notwithstanding her awareness of local and global environment.

Besides, it is hard to establish that her awareness of contemporary events and issues directly activated her creative energy as it did Whitman's and other contemporary writers'. In a letter to Mrs. Holland, her indifference to public affairs comes out clearly : "George Washington was the father of his country" — George who? that sums up all politics to me" (Letters Vol. III, no.849). In many of her letters throughout the years, we see evidence of this unconcern. To Mabel Todd in Summer 1885 she writes: "sweet land of Liberty" is a superficial Carol till it concerns ourselves" (Letters Vol. III: 882). More instances can easily be cited from her comments on public issues. She hardly deals with any explicit social or political concerns of the time like the Civil War, slavery, poverty, women's rights, etc. She makes no attempt to change objective reality. Her poetry is primarily a discourse of the personal and the eternal. It has got no "design" upon the world and concentrates instead on the inner reality of the human self explored in terms of her own complex self. She is primarily concerned with her own soul engaged in universal issues like love, death, life, God and immortality. One finds a typical instance in the poem quoted below:

Soto ! Explore thyself !

Therein thyself shalt find

The "Undiscovered continent" – (832)

References to public issues and events do exist in some of her poems. But she pulls those references away from their objective reality and mostly uses them as metaphors in a personal context or reflects on them from philosophical or metaphysical perspectives. Her battle imagery particularly reflects this tendency. Words like war, battle, prison are used in a purely subjective context to describe the struggles in the self or serve as starting point for psychological and philosophical thoughts. Poem 639 explores the psychology of a defeated self:

My Portion is Defeat – today –

A paler luck than Victory –

Then the persona defines defeat in terms of death and human suffering:

'Tis populous with Bone and stain –

And Men too straight to stoop again –

And piles of solid Moan –

And Chips of Blank – in Boyish Eyes – (639)

Defeat is "Death's surprise" and 'blank' stare in "Boyish eyes".

The terrible destruction and human loss during the Civil War may be at the source of such a poem. But instead of focussing on particular events, the poem becomes an ahistorical and universal lament for the human tragedy associated with war. Another poem on war and victory also does not make any reference to the Civil War that was raging at that time. Rather, it subtly voices the moral despair of a triumphant person at the spectacle of human suffering caused by war. The victor's triumph lasted "till the Drums had left the Dead alone". But he "hated Glory" of triumph when he "stole along/ To where the finished Faces" (1227). The sense of victory collapses like a fragile object : "I dropped my Victory" (1227). The feeling of waste and meaninglessness touchingly comes out through this strange image. In some poems, words like "Prison" are used in

a metaphoric or philosophical sense. So human life is a "magic Prison" in 1601, and in another, prisons are made of "Phantasm Steel —/ whose features - day - night - are present to us". We can never escape this "prison" (652). The "prison" here goes beyond its usual traditional meaning and acts as a starting point for deeper existential thought. From this perspective, Dickinson differs markedly from her contemporaries. Turbulent public events of the time found direct creative expression in their writings. Whitman's major poems in Leaves of Grass such as "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd", "Drum-Taps" are directly inspired by the events of the Civil War, Lincoln's assassination, etc. Historical context leaves its distinct marks on Whitman's poetry. War inspired also Melville's first book of poems, "Battle pieces and Aspects of War" (1866). Dickinson, however, transforms topical issues into ahistorical and universal themes. Poems abound demonstrating her constant effort to dissociate words from their definite socio-historical context and employ them in psychic and philosophical realms that fuse the topical with the personal. So her "wars" are laid away in "books" (1549); thoughts of real life battle merges with her reflection on death, the subject of her life-long pre occupation:

I have one Battle more -
 A Foe whom I have never seen
 But oft has scanned me O'er - (1549)

It would be contrafactual to insist on the socio-historical consciousness in her verse. At the most, we may agree with Thomas W. Ford who suggests that Dickinson's awareness of the Civil War only increased her sensitivity to human suffering and her creativity (Emily Dickinson and the Civil War (1965)). A number of critics identify this ahistorical and private nature of her verse as her differentia. For instance, Robert Weisbuch observes in her Emily Dickinson's Poetry : "Dickinson's identity with the American romantics is some what obscured by her own lack of historical concerns. She is far less concerned than her fellows with the idea of America and far less involved in the particular political issues of

the day" (7). Benjamin Spencer also comments that Dickinson left very little evidence of her participation in the "quest for nationality" (Quest for Nationality 213). Making the same point, John Lynen writes : "Emily Dickinson is a baffling poet because she seems to bear little or no relation to the historical period within which she worked. She stands apart, as indifferent to the literary movements of her day as to its great events" (College English 28 November 1966 PP 126-136).

From the feminist perspective, however, the origin of this sense of estrangement lies in the fact that Dickinson is a woman poet. Feminist scholars contend that a powerful poetic voice like Dickinson could hardly identify her authentic poetic self with the predominantly patriarchal socio-literary culture of her time. She knew that Emerson's call for an American poet was the call not for a female but for a male poet. Joanne Feit Diehl justly observes on this point that "the woman poet does not, in the nineteenth century... perceive herself as speaking for communal experience, as "representative". Instead, women poets more often perceive themselves as exceptions, as isolates, departing from, rather than building upon a tradition" (Women Poets and the American Sublime 2). Dickinson's definition of herself as a 'Nobody', they feel, is her response to this marginalization of women in contemporary America :

I am Nobody ! who are you?

Are you - Nobody - Too? (288)

This sense of being a 'Nobody' explains her indifference to literary nationalism so enthusiastically advocated by Emerson and Whitman. Dickinson's sense of being an outsider, insist her feminist critics, inspires her thematic and stylistic novelty. So Joanne Feit Diehl argues that Dickinson's radical experimentation with language emerged from her "deep sense of freedom" and from her "sense of discontinuity" from the "great male company of poets" (Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination 185).

Unlike other contemporary poets, and especially unlike Whitman, Dickinson brings to bear upon her treatment of experience a critical perspective, a trait that links her with the moderns. She is a romantic yet she diverges significantly from the British and the American romantics in her original attitude to self and nature. She is a realist; yet her realism is not of a social-historical kind. Hers is a drama of the soul supported by the modern day discoveries in the realm of human psychology. Whitman's sense of realism primarily centers upon the externals of life. The photographic realism of the some parts of "Songs of Myself" is indeed remarkable. Richard Volney Chase finds the lines quoted below from section 8 of "Song of Myself" almost "novelistic" in description:

The little one sleeps in its cradle,
I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush away flies
with my hand.

(qtd. in Leaves of Grass 891)

Whitman's snapshots of city life - "the blab of the pave", "the heavy omnibus", "the driver with its interrogating thumb" etc. - anticipate Eliot's city pictures, though the despair of "The Waste land" is not to be found in them. Whitman is a visionary too. His visionary passages, his "cosmos-inspired" verses are admittedly powerful. Who can write such an inspired and passionate invocation to the sun except a mystic and visionary?

O Thou transcendent,
Nameless, the fibre and the breath,
Light of the light, shedding forth universes, thou centre of them
.
Thou pulse — thou motive of the stars, suns, systems,
That circling, move in order, safe, harmonious,
Awthart the shapeless vastness of the space. . . .

("Passage to India", Leaves of Grass 411)

Dickinson is not a mystic in the traditional sense. But she is also capable of transcendent moments. However, her transcendence never wells up from external sources. Dickinson's poems on the sun manifest the enormous temperamental difference between the two poets. She is never rapturous over the mystic power of the sun. She portrays the mighty sun in a critical, realistic style that often borders on the irreverent. So, the sun in her poem "does not allow the caprices of the Atmosphere" to "interrupt His Yellow Plan" (591). The sun "does not so much as turn His" majestic head when the "snow heaves Balls of Specks, like vicious Boy/ Directly in his eye". The final stanza suddenly takes a different turn and upholds the tiny creatures of this earth :

Yet Any passing by
 Would dream Ourselves — the busier
 As the Minutest Bee
 That rides — emits a Thunder —
 A Bomb — to justify — (591).

Another instance of this dry, descriptive style without any mystic overtone:

The sun in reining to the west
 Makes not as much of sound
 As Cart of man in road below
 Adroitly turning round
 That whiffletree of Amethyst (1636)

This down-to-earth realism associating the sun with "cart of man in road below" reveals a mind very close to modern sensibility. A number of poems on the sun are written in the same vein more or less without any transcendental enthusiasm (eg. nos 871, 1023, 1447).

William James in a lecture in 1895 opined that Whitman was temperamentally "incapable of believing that anything seriously evil can exist" (The Will to Believe 32). Whitman was not, however, blind to the evils or insensitive to sufferings

that haunt man. Whitman's poem "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances" in Leaves of Grass speaks of his uncertainty and the anxiety that "reliance and hope are but speculations after all". He even doubts for a moment that "maybe identity beyond the grave is a beautiful fable only". But faith in human love and affection ultimately allays all sense of fear and uncertainty :

To me these and the like of these are curiously answer'd by my
Lovers, my dear friends,
When he whom I love travels with me or sits a long while holding
me by the hand. (Leaves of Grass 120)

He knows he cannot "answer the question of appearances or that of identity beyond the grave". But he is satisfied with human love:

"He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me"
(Leaves of Grass 120)

Dickinson's questioning mind, however, is never satisfied so easily. The sense of evil, dread or doubt is always a haunting presence in her verse. Her poems that celebrate the joy of life always take into account fears, doubts and despair. This everpresent sense of dread imparts to her poems of rapture a peculiar intensity :

My reward for Being, was This
My premium - My Bliss -
An Admiralty, less -
And realms -just Dross (343)

To her "Bliss" is "like Murder-/ Omnipotent – Acute –"(379). In her inclusive vision, there is no retreat from one feeling to another. Both the sceptic and the oracular voices coexist and combine to create a distinctive note of her own.

Dickinson's poems on death are also equally characteristic. Her poems treat death either as a direct subject or as a form of analogy. Thought of death possessed her sensitive and complex mind from a very early age. At twenty, she writes to her friend Jane Humphrey: "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 I love; that makes me sometimes speak of it when I don't intend" (Letters Vol.I:197-98). Dominant feeling about death in her verse is one of incomprehension and awe. Death is a mystery as it can be least understood by direct experience. It is a "riddle" through which each of us must "walk" (50). It is the "spacious arm .. /That none can understand" (1625). Life, she writes in a poem, we can understand but "Death we do not know" (698). In poem after poem, she tries desperately to define death and to bring it within the range of comprehension : "Death is a long - long Sleep / That makes no show for Morn" (654). It is a "hurry in the breath" and it is "ecstasy of parting" (71). In her eagerness to explore the mystery of death, Dickinson even personifies it. She imagines death "wore no sandal on his foot - / And stepped like flakes of snow" /"His Gait was soundless". And the laughter of death is like the "Breeze- / That dies away in Dimples / Among the pensive Trees" -(274).

One of the masterpieces of her death poems beginning with the line "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died-" focuses on the moment of dying. It is a memorable effort to experience in imagination the last feeling of a dying person. The dying person feels the apprehensive silence that surrounds the room :

The stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air -
Between the Heaves of Storm - (465)

The dying one is prepared to die, and then "interposed a Fly -". The buzz of the fly seems "blue", "uncertain" and "stumbling" to the confused perception of the dying person. Finally, the "Windows failed – and then / I could not see to see -". The poem ends with the anguished uncertainty without any promise of the light that supposedly waits after death.

The significant fact that emerges from her death-poems is her separateness from both the Christian and the Romantic tradition of poetry on death. The

poem we have just discussed also demonstrates this implicit distrust of orthodox beliefs. The living mourners wait for that last onset “– when the King/ Be witnessed – in the room” (405). But instead of the “King” there comes a “fly” with its “blue” uncertain “buzz”. The change from the “King” to the “fly”, an insect, subtly undermines all the expectation of the divine at the moment of death. The final line “I could not see to see” also directly refutes the vision of light imagined for the dying person.

“Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –”(216), another memorable poem on death, also sharply marks Dickinson's divergence from traditional death-poetry. The poem begins with an apparent acceptance of the conventional Christian consolation and then gradually exposes the myth through her wonderfully suggestive words in the next lines to follow. The dead lie “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers / Untouched by Morning / And untouched by Noon –”. “Alabaster” implies a sort of purity and peace. But the “Chambers”, “untouched by Morning” and “Noon;” ironically suggest a cold prison locking out the morning and sunshine, thus hinting at the deprivation from the joys of living nature. The dead are the “meek members of the Resurrection”, who wait, covered by “rafter of Satin” under “Roof of Stone”. The expression “Roof of Stone” subtly negates the warmth of the rafter of satin and exposes the stark reality of death. The second stanza even more directly questions the orthodox hope of resurrection after death by emphasizing the warmth and vitality of life the dead miss :

Light laughs the breeze
 In her Castle above them –
 Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,
 Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence –
 Ah, what sagacity perished here! (216)

On close scrutiny, the poem offers a chilling comfortless view of death instead of a hopeful one assuring immortality. Dickinson does not also romanticize

death in the manner of Keats or other romantic poets. She is never in love with “easeful death” or hears the “Whispers of heavenly death” (Leaves of Grass 442). Rather, she emphasizes the feeling of waste, the loss of vitality and dynamism caused by death. Dead are

As far from pity as complaint-
As cool to speech -as stone- (496)

They are “as near yourself - Today / As children to the Rainbow’s scarf / or Sunsets’ Yellow Play / to eyelids in the Sepulchre” (496). Joys of nature, the colour of the butterflies are nothing to the “eyelids in the Sepulchre” (496). The dead are away from the splendours of the morning and the noon. The keen sense of waste comes out wonderfully in the following lines :

Insulting is the sun
To him whose mortal light
Beguiled of immortality
Bequeaths him to the night. (1724)

The buried dead forces this despairing question upon the poet :

Was ever idleness like This ?
Upon a Bank of Stone
To bask the Centuries away —
Nor once look up — for Noon ? (654)

Whitman, for all his originality, perceives death in the familiar nineteenth-century way that celebrates the immortality of the human soul. Though not literally religious, he conforms to convention in his effort to overcome the fear of death. “To Think of Time” thus records his intense desire to believe that “... the purpose and essence of the known life, the transient / Is to form and decide identity for the unknown life, the permanent” (“To Think of Time”, Leaves of Grass 439). It is hard for him to accept that death reduces man to “ashes of

dung”:

“If maggots and rats ended us, then Alarum! for we are betray'd,”
 (“To Think of Time”, Leaves of Grass 439)

Seeking consolation in the traditional religious belief, Whitman finds in death beginning of a new cycle of life: “The smallest sprout shows that there is really no death but change” (“Song of Myself”, Leaves of Grass 126). Birth and death are merely stages in the eternal cycle of life. So he enthusiastically celebrates immortality in the last lines of the poem :

I swear I think there is nothing but immortality !
 That the exquisite scheme is for it, and the nebulous float is for it,

 And the cohering is for it!
 And all preparation is for it - and identity is for it- and life and
 Materials are altogether for it!

(“To Think of Time”, Leaves of Grass 440)

He is not afraid of the “bitter hug of mortality”. For him, life always returns :
 “Life I reckon you are the leavings of many death” (“Song of Myself”, Leaves of Grass 87). Existential anxiety about death, the poignant sense of waste at the loss of life and earth that haunt Dickinson's poetry hardly figure in Whitman's poems on death. Rather, he celebrates human life in a romantic transcendental vein:

I know that I am deathless

 I know that I shall not pass like a Child's Carlicue Cut with burnt
 stick at night.

(“Song of Myself”, Leaves of Grass 48)

These conceptual differences apart, languages of Whitman and Dickinson are also very dissimilar. The extreme unconventionality of Dickinson's language

disrupting normal grammatical processes reflects an epistemological stance of doubt, negation and indeterminacy, baffling to her contemporary reader. These tendencies not only foreshadow modern Poetry but also "seem consonant", as David Porter argues, "with our post-modernist literary expectation" (Modern Idiom 117). Whitman too shocked his readers with the rude freshness of his long, sloping and irregular lines. George Saintsbury's review of the 1871 edition of Leaves of Grass well-exemplifies contemporary attitude to its novelty. "He employs", Saintsbury observes, "neither" rhyme, nor even regular meter ... A page of his work has little or no look of poetry about it" (qtd.in Leaves of Grass 788). Yet Whitman's language does not have the complex unintelligibility characteristic of Dickinson. For all its strangeness, Whitman's literary form is consonant with his desire for universality. His language is able to communicate its meaning while search for meaning in Dickinson stretches language to its utmost limit and generates multiple and often contradictory critical perspectives. The principal features of her poetics- the use of the dash and the question marks, absence of titles, infrequent use of periods and often no closing punctuation etc. - create an impression that Dickinson desires to unsettle rather than to conclude with a fixed meaning. Examples abound. For instance, the emphatic and assertive "Title Divine- is mine!" ends in doubt and indeterminacy with a question mark- "Is this the way?" (1072). For another convenient example, we have no. 581. Conviction expressed in the first lines- "I found the words to every thought / I ever had but one-" lapses into doubt in the closing "How would your own begin? / Can Blaze be shown in Cochineal / or Noon- in Mazarin?" (581).

Dickinson's poems also contain variants or alternatives for a word or line without indicating her particular choice and thus broaden the possibilities for several meanings or interpretations with equal importance instead of a single meaning or settled conviction. Sometimes again these variant words stand in opposition to each other and create contradictory meanings, (see Johnson's

The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson). In either way, the variants contribute to the indeterminacy of meaning and thereby provoke multiple points of view. This is a very distinctive feature of Dickinson's poetry that aligns her with our post-modern sensibilities. Post-modern conception of meaning also insists on a situation of plurality and its accompanying epistemological uncertainty.

In discussing this issue of indeterminacy in her verse we may justly recall Roland Hagenbüchles's observation that metonymy is the chief structural principle of Dickinson's poetics because metonymy's "deliberate indeterminacy . . . alone can do justice to the mystery of existence" ("Precision" 50).

Frequent use of irony as a dominant rhetorical device also marks her out from her contemporary poets. Whitman's affirmative life-vision was not appropriate for irony as irony is unsuited for expressing stable, meaningful and unified worldview. Irony results from a sceptical attitude to life and from a sense of dissonance and anomaly. Irony as a rhetorical device suited Dickinson's purpose as the elements of scepticism, doubt and dissonance pervade her poetry, particularly noticeable in her subtle critique of patriarchy and conventional religious faith.

Whitman's and Dickinson's fundamental dissimilarities provoke a critic to observe that "from Whitman to Dickinson the transition is so abrupt as to make any attempt to include them in a common perspective seem hopeless" (Cambon 27). Thus, Dickinson's vision of life and her unconventional poetic style make her an outsider. Unlike Emerson and Whitman, she is very close to modern sensibility. Loneliness and alienation, the two major themes of modern day literature, are also the obsessive themes of Dickinson's poetry. Worthnoting in this context is Roland Hagenbüchle's observation: "If one agrees that discontinuity is at the root of modernity, then it is not Emerson and Whitman who stand at the threshold of modern poetry, but Dickinson . . ." . Dickinson, according to him, may be called a "post-romantic whose anti-lyrical poetry springs from the very experience of disharmony and loss" ("Sign and process: The Concept of

Language in Emerson and Dickinson” 137-55). So despite strong traces of similarity, Dickinson does not belong with Emerson and Whitman to the same literary scene. She is a poet of the nineteenth century. But she goes beyond it and stands as a poet apart.

CHAPTER-V
"INTIMATE YET ESTRANGED"

CHAPTER - V

"Intimate Yet Estranged"

It is necessary to place Dickinson beside the women poets of her time to understand her uniqueness as a poet. Many Dickinson critics try to view her as an integral part of the contemporary women's literary tradition. Emily Stipes Watts in The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945 (1977) discusses Dickinson's use of images and literary conventions and shows their close parallels in the contemporary women's writing. From this she concludes that Dickinson's poetry "in a variety of ways ... stands firmly within the developing tendencies of American female verse" (125). Cheryl Walker in The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture before 1900 (1982) points to the themes and motifs Dickinson shared with the other women writers of her age. She observes that the motif of "the secret sorrow" dominated contemporary women's poetry and Dickinson gave the secret sorrow an enduring form (89). Joanne Dobson's 1985 dissertation situates Dickinson within the tradition of 19th century women writers and stresses her conformity to the prevalent social norms. Dobson observes that "it would be inspiring but not, I think, wholly realistic, to believe that Dickinson sprang into poetic utterance as a full-fledged and sophisticated feminist /modernist" (37).

Dickinson's letters and frequent prose observations point to her keen interest in the British women writers — Elizabeth Barret Browning, the Brontes and George Eliot — providing her a sort of role-models. Their writings offered her intellectual, artistic and psychological support. However, her contemporaries included a number of American women poets and prose-writers. Alice Cary, Catherine Maria Sedgwick, Elizabeth Oakes Prince Smith, Frances Sargent Osgood and Lydia Huntley Sigourney, to name a few important writers - all lived

and wrote throughout the 1860s and 70s. Three important anthologies of women's verse — Caroline May's The American Female Poets (1848), Rufus Griswold's The Female Poets of America (1848) and Thomas Buchanan Read's The Female Poets of America (1849) - saw publication during the mid-century. So quite a large body of women's verse was available to her when she began her literary career. Her letters testify that she heard about them and also read much of their works as she grew up and entered her youth. Ellen Moers writes on Dickinson's wide-ranging interest in her contemporary women writers :

She read and reread every Anglo-American writer of her time : Helen Hunt Jackson, Lydia Maria Child and Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lady Georgina Fullerton and Dinah Maria Craik and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Rebecca Harding Davis and Harriet Prescott Spofford and Francesca Alexander and Mathilde Mackarness and everything that George Eliot and Mrs. Browning and all the Brontes wrote. (Literary Women: The Great Writers 92)

Conventions and characteristics of contemporary women's poetry were thus familiar to Dickinson, and she employed them in her poetry very often. Major themes of Dickinson's poems such as love, death, nature, God, immortality, these critics suggest, are also the common themes of her contemporary women poets. Her "expressive" techniques such as irony, indirection, ambivalence and other conventional feminine images have also their analogues in the other women writers of the time.

Yet Dickinson towers over them all and appears significantly different from these women writers when we compare her poetry with theirs from the perspective of poetic vision and style. The smooth and predictable women's verse of the time bears very little similarity to her brief and terse lyrics often written in an incomprehensible literary style. Moreover, She adds new substance to the

common themes of poetry and converts them into powerful statements of original insight. Similarly, conventions of the female literary tradition were transmuted into something entirely new by her individual genius.

A brief discussion of the contemporary attitude to women and especially to literary women may help to bring out her uniqueness amongst her female contemporaries. Nineteenth-century American society considered domesticity, religion and morality as women's major concerns. Particularly, religion was considered far more necessary to women than to men: "A woman should be a Christian", writes a father to her daughter (Douglas 44). Women's importance lay in their "moral elevation" (Douglas 44). In Democracy in America (1835), the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville observes: "The singular prosperity and growing strength of [Americans] ought mainly to be attributed to the superiority of their women" (214). This superiority was essentially due to women's morality: "No free communities ever existed without morals and the morals are the work of women" (ibid 196). Catherine Beecher Stowe in "An address to the Christian Women of America" asserts that "woman's great mission is to train ignorant, weak, immature creatures to obey the laws of God, first in the family, then in the school, then in the world (Parker 149). Society expected an ideal woman to be meek and moral, long-suffering and self-effacing, religious and other-worldly. Full emotional and intellectual maturity were considered unnecessary for women. Creative gift was thought to be an essentially male prerogative. Naturally artistic and literary activity were excluded from the female purview. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar quote a poem by Anna Finch to illustrate the notion that a literary woman was something of a freak :

Good breeding, fashion, dancing, dressing, play
 Are the accomplishments we shou'd desire;
 To write, or read or think or to enquire
 We'd cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time

While the dull manage, of a servile house
Is held by some our utmost art and use.

(qtd. in The Madwoman in the Attic 8)

Most of the prominent literary men of the time also held this view. Gilbert and Gubar in Madwoman in the Attic (1979) quote Robert Southey's message to Charlotte Bronte: "Literature is not the business of a woman's life and cannot be" (8). This conservatism of Southey represented the majority attitude to the issue under discussion. Edward Dickinson's five-part article on "Female Education" in a short-lived Amherst newspaper, "New England Inquire", also echoes the same antagonism towards literary women (Wolff 119).

In such a social and intellectual climate, women writers could hardly claim themselves as creative artists with impersonal devotion to art. Afraid to think of themselves as artists, women writers always justified their writing on moral and financial grounds. The desire to be an "instrument of good" (Letters of Life 324), as Lydia Sigourney states in her autobiography, and an acute need for money were the two permitted motives for women's literary activity. Nina Baym observes, "the claim of need for any woman or the rationale of public service motive for the comfortable would sanction female authorship" (Women's Fiction 175). Just as Lydia Sigourney wanted her poems to be moral weapons, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the famous author of Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), also offered moral and financial needs as reasons for her writing career. Calvin Stowe emphasizes in a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe the moral motivations: "God has written it in your book that you must be a literary woman and who are we that we should contend against God?" (Life and Letters 105). Rufus Griswold's preface to The Female Poets of America (1848) also speaks of woman's moral nature as the chief factor behind writing.

So, as a result of social pressures and stereotyped assumptions about female identity, women's writing in the nineteenth century, was intensely moral,

social and didactic in orientation. This accounts for the emergence of a number of women novelists during this period as novel-writing seemed less difficult and socially and morally more useful than poetry writing. Catherine Maria Sedgwick wrote her first novel A New England Tale (1822) with clear moral and religious intentions. Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), Rebecca Harding Davis's Life in the Iron Mills (1861) and Helen Hunt Jackson's Ramona (1884) are also three important fictions in the category of the literature of social advocacy. Stowe's novel is a fierce indictment of slavery; Davis's short story exposes the exploitation of the working class, and Helen Hunt Jackson depicts the cruel eviction of the native Americans from their ancestral land. Women poets, however, were comparatively few. Poetry was a problematic form for women writers. Poetry, specially lyric poetry, seemed incompatible with the socially approved identity of women. It is difficult to suppress subjectivity in poetry as the 'I' in lyric poetry implies a strong assertive self. Poets who wanted to succeed or did achieve success wrote in conformity to societal expectations on moral and social themes. Lydia Sigourney was one of the very popular women poets of the time. Her first volume of poems was titled "Moral Pieces, in Prose and Verse. In Traits of the Aborigines of America (1822), a five-canto poem in blank verse, she pleads for fairness to the oppressed Indians. Sigourney attempted an epic poem "Pocahontas" (1841). Aaron Kramer speaks of it as an "apology and a memorial to these scorned and perished people" (The Prophetic Tradition in American Poetry) (223). Form and content of other successful and publishing women poets such as Francis Osgood (1811-1850), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1815-1852), Helen Hunt Jackson and many others more or less conformed to these social conditioning and wrote a kind of public poetry. Real life emotions of ambition, anger and sexuality were excluded from their portrayal of women characters in poetry. Thus intense moral and didactic responsibility attributed to women made it impossible for them to portray real-life adult women. The conflict and the disruption, the agony of sorrow or the ecstasy of deeply felt

emotions of a real woman must be left out of literary articulation to maintain the ideal image of woman as sweet, perfect, pious, domestic or contented. As a result, cultural stereotypes of womanhood instead of the image of the living individual woman dominated women's literature in general. Forceful original style was discouraged also in favour of sentimental narrative in the novel and familiar rhythm and rhyme in poetry.

When we consider Emily Dickinson as a woman poet against this socio-literary background, she appears radically different. She is, no doubt, to a great extent, a part of the established tradition. However, unlike the majority of women writers of the time, Dickinson had no social, moral or financial spur to creativity. Her poems almost disregard any reference to the great public issues of her era. While slavery, child labour, women's right, etc, were often the major concerns of her colleagues, the personal and eternal rather than the public and temporal inform Dickinson's poetry. Her interest in social and public issues was largely metaphoric. She is more interested in using the linguistic possibilities of her comments on social or public issues instead of using them as facts of social reality. She can write about the "Campaign inscrutable of the interior". Tragic fact of the Civil War provokes a poem of a very different sort:

To fight aloud is very brave
 But gallanter, I know
 Who charge within the bosom
 The cavalry of Woe – (126)

Contemporary women writers found the image of hunger and starvation attractive and useful as symbols of deprivation. Ann Stephens portrays with stark realism the actual pangs of hunger in Fashion and Famine (1854). Rebecca Harding Davis in her Life in the Iron Mills (1861) offers both actual and metaphoric pangs of hunger of the poor. Infact, nineteenth-century women's literature takes up hunger and starvation as major themes. Dickinson, however, employs symbols

of hunger and starvation in a profoundly metaphoric sense pulling them away from their objective social meanings. Movement of her images is from the external world to the world of the individual self. Poem no. 579 speaks metaphorically of the hunger for love :

I had been hungry, all the Years
 My Noon had Come – to – dine –
 I trembling drew the Table near –
 And touched the Curious Wine – (579)

There are, however, a few references to social or public issues in some of Dickinson's letters. But they highlight her tendency to give the topic some personal dimension, ignoring their social aspect. She writes to Susan Gilbert in Baltimore where a convention of the Whig party was being held at the time:

... Why cant [sic] I be a Delegate to the great Whig Convention?
 - dont [sic] I know all about Daniel Webster, and the Tarrif, and
 the Law? Then, Sushi I could see you, during a pause in the
 session - (Letters Vol.I:212)

Her letter to Elizabeth Holland in August 1881 also manifests this tendency: "When I look in the Morning Paper to see how the president is, I know you are looking too ... (Letters Vol. III :706).

Dickinson's unconcern with moral or public issues makes her reference to them something very personal. This lack of any social or didactic concern is a quality that separates her from her contemporaries. Her writing at the best reveals her generalized philosophical and psychological insights into human nature. A poem like the one quoted below clearly illustrates this tendency :

It's such a little thing to weep
 So short a thing to Sigh
 And yet – by Trades – the size of these
 We men and Women die ! (189)

Her lack of moral concern comes out clearly once contrasted with Helen Hunt Jackson who was a powerful poet of her time. Jackson's poems on nature are quite interesting. But Jackson follows the conventional assumptions about nature. Her poem "March" evokes a realistic image of the season :

Beneath the Sheltering walls the thin snow clings –
 Dead Winter's skeleton, left bleaching, white,
 Disjointed, crumbling, on unfriendly fields. (Verses 149)

However, the poem ends with the usual conventional moralizing about the healing influence of nature as Jackson follows didactic tendencies usual among women poets of her era :

Ah, March ! We know thou art
 Kindhearted, spite of ugly looks and threats,
 And, out of sight, art nursing April's violets !

The received image of nature in the closing lines negates the realistic vision of the opening. In Dickinson, however, nature is never spiritualized. She rather emphasizes its mystery, its incomprehensibility and its remoteness from man. A case in point is her poem on the moon. The moon is like a guillotined head or a stemless flower. It is hard to find such a startling image in the whole range of contemporary American women's poetry. She has no concern for the mysteries of "life-Death-and Afterwards" that "harass" human beings (629). Such poems illustrate how sharply Dickinson diverges from the contemporary women poets.

What makes Dickinson almost an outsider to the women's literary tradition is her penchant for exploring the significance of women's personal experience. Self-expression was her only creative imperative. Many of her poems directly violate the taboo on the uninhibited presentation of a woman's feeling by exploring the hidden depths of her mind. This penetrating subjectivity invests her work with a rare depth and fascination. The female persona in Dickinson's poetry is very often fierce in her self expression. She often defines herself through

defiance and deviation. She is often a "Debauchee of the Dew-" (214), a little carefree "Tippler" leaning against the sun (214), an angry "leopard" (492) and also a passionate woman wishing the luxury of the "Wild Nights" (249). Indeed the poem revels in expressing adult female sexuality :

Wild Nights-Wild Nights !
 were I with thee
 Wild Nights should be
 Our Luxury ! (249)

The "I" in Dickinson's poem is often an apostate who considers the conventional heaven a "House of Suppositions" (696). Her female persona is often a 'Queen', an independent woman with a "Will to choose or reject" (508) or an agonized soul who felt a "funeral in the brain" (280). These Dickinsonian women stand in direct opposition to the stereotyped images of conventional woman.

However, Emily Dickinson had to pay much to maintain her artistic integrity. With barely a handful of poems published anonymously during her life time and known only to a few half-appreciative friends and family, she had no recognition as a poet. Her refusal to publish cannot be explained away as a natural desire for privacy and reticence common among nineteenth-century women. However much her aversion to the publication of her poems and notwithstanding her letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson projecting herself as a shy genius, Higginson's failure to appreciate the poems made her realize the impossibility of winning contemporary recognition. His failure to evaluate her poetry led her to renounce her ambition to be a published poet. She realised that the socially accepted subject-matter and undemanding language were the passport to publication and popular success. She accepted her "Barefoot" rank of a private poet perhaps hoping for a favourable future "Tribunal". Refusal to compromise enabled her to write her intensely personal poems unhindered by social proscriptions. However, it alienated her from her peers and destined her to a

"nobody" existence during her life-time.

Dickinson's individuality comes through when we analyse her use of the common conventions in contemporary women's poetry. In conformity to the prevailing socio-cultural norms, women's literature shows extensive use of female persona as little girls, daisy, mouse, wife/bride, etc., images that reinforced the social view about women as "Nobody". Nina Baym (Women's Fiction), Barbara Mossberg (When the Writer is a Daughter) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (The Mad woman in the Attic) have dealt with these conventions and their implication and appeal to the contemporary readers. The use of these conventions, as it appears from their observations, arose from the proscription on the articulation of mature and complex experience of the real life individual women. Society approved of literary depiction of women as small, timid and perpetually dependent. Women in literature must not be shown in their full physical and intellectual maturity. These social expectations put the women poets in a very disadvantageous position. This rigid stereotyping of women in literature severely limited the intellectual and aesthetic excellence of their art. However, most women writers conformed to the conventional mode of expression that reinforced the socially approved perception about women. As a result, little girl persona dominated women's fiction and poetry. Choice of the little girl protagonist allowed women writers to avoid anxieties about the portrayal of adult female ambition and female sexuality.

Observation of these conventions in the available literature shows that it has two distinct aspects : convention of the good little girl and the convention of the naughty little girl. Barbara Mossberg calls them daughter persona. For her, this little girl image has a dual aspect: "the dutiful daughter and the rebellious daughter" (When a Writer is a Daughter 198). The "dutiful daughter" or the good little girl was an expression of feminine obedience and perfection, and the "rebellious daughter" represented female anger and ambition. Little Montgomery in Susan Warner's The Wide Wide World (1850) and Topsy, the slave-child in Uncle

Tom's Cabin represent this naughty girl or "rebellious daughter" persona. Through these naughty girl figures women writers freely expressed woman's anger and rebelliousness otherwise proscribed from articulation.

Examples of the good little girl protagonist model abound in contemporary women's prose and poetry. Mara in Stowe's The Pearl of Orr's Island (1862) and Eva in Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) are two characteristic examples. Fleda in Susan Warner's Queechy (1852) is another representative example of this dutiful daughter convention of the women's literature. In poetry, Elizabeth Oakes Smith's saintly Eva in ^{The} Sinless Child (1834) represents the model-figure of the saintly little girl:

Her mother said that Eva's lips
 Had never falsehood known;
 No angry words had ever, marred
 The music of their tone.
 And truth spoke out in every line
 Of her fair, tranquil face.
 Where love and peace, twin-dwelling pair,
 Had found a resting place.

The popular concept of women's spiritual power compensating for their lack of real power in society informs these lines. This exemplary girl persona of the female literary tradition explicitly reinforces society's concept of female morality and selfless goodness. Interestingly enough, all these model girl figures die sooner or later. Joanne Dobson justly observes that death as the final destiny of all these model girls perhaps suggests the incompatibility of such ideals with the reality of adult womanhood: "The inevitable end of all this goodness and obedience is the eschewal of adulthood by an early death or by permanent ladylike 'invisibility'" (Dobson, "Emily Dickinson and Mid-Nineteenth Century American Women Writers" 100).

Whether she liked them or not, Dickinson was aware of these conventions popular in women's poetry. She writes to Susan Dickinson in one of her letters: "I have just read three little books, not great, not thrilling-- but sweet and true ... pure little lives - loving God, and their parents, and obeying the laws of the land;- yet read, if you meet them, Sushi, for they will do one good" (Letters Vol.I: 195). She was interested in them and employed many of these conventional female personae such as daisy, child, mouse, wife / bride etc. in her verse. Very often, her poems employ these images of women as subtle ironic comments on those stereotyped images. This ambivalence and complexity is particularly felt in Dickinson's use of little girl and wife/bride images in a number of poems.

Before we begin to study her handling of these popular conventions, it will be interesting to observe that there may be other complex psychological and sociological reasons for their presence in Dickinson's poetry. A close look at her life and letters shows her persistent interest in childhood. She often wished in her letters that she could return to childhood. She praised one friend for being "more of a woman than I am, for I love so to be a child" (Sewall, Life Vol.II 332). At twenty-one, "she longed "to ramble away as children, [with Sue] among the woods and forget these many years, and those sorrowing cares, and each become a child again" (Sewall, Life Vol.II: 332). To her brother she writes: "I wish we were always children" (Sewall, Life Vol.II: 332). She believed sincerely that "the angel begins in the morning in every human life" (Life Vol.II: 333). Sewall explains this fascination with childhood as emerging from her love of the freshness and freedom of childhood. It was her sincere belief that "The child's faith is new". It is "Wide Like the Sunrise / on fresh Eyes--" (637).

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, however, offer a contrary view that Dickinson's keen desire for a permanent childhood arose out of her wish to avoid that "concept of womanliness which required self-abnegating renunciation" (The Madwoman in the Attic 590). They argue that Dickinson perhaps felt that to gain female adulthood in her society meant a renunciation of her vocation as an

artist and complete loss of individuality. So she preferred to remain in her father's house "a childlike nobody" instead of becoming a wifely nobody in a husband's house (Madwoman 591).

Accordingly, the poetic convention of the child persona suited Dickinson. Her strongest poems dramatize childhood as their distinguishing quality. She employed both the good and the bad persona of the little girl/daughter convention in a number of poems (Nos.70, 248, 520, 613, 874, 1201 and some others). Her little girls, like similar figures in contemporary women's poetry, are frequently wretched, bullied and neglected by cruel guardians and relatives. She often goes far beyond other literary women of her time in portraying the pathos of their situation. So the little girl in poem 874 imagines that "they won't frown" upon her or 'tease' her after her death :

Then They will hasten to the Door
To call the little Girl
Who cannot thank Them for the Ice
That filled the lipping full. (874)

Her little girl figures, deprived of the happiness of love, often suggest the powerlessness of women. The girl child in 613, for instance, resents society's repressive attempt to make her still:

They shut me up in Prose –
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet –
Because they liked me "still"– (613)

Along with this dutiful or obedient little girl, coexists the other persona of the naughty or rebellious daughter. These pictures constitute Dickinson's subtle and ironical perspective on the situations. The little girl in 1201 "pull" her "Stockings off" and wades in water "For the Disobedience' Sake". The poet invests her with an independence of will not permitted by society. The girl remains

unsubmissive up to the end and cites evidence from the Bible for doing so:

Boy that lived for "or'ter"
 Went to Heaven perhaps at Death
 And perhaps he didn't
 Moses wasn't fairly used –
 Ananias wasn't – (1201)

Through these protesting little girls, Dickinson often attacks orthodox religion. The child in poem no. 376 pleads for mercy. But her prayer only exposes the cruel indifference of God. An innocent, curious child enquires in poem no.215: "What is paradise?" So use of the little girl figure places Dickinson within her contemporary female literary culture as Cheryl Walker, Emily Watts Stipes and more recently Barton Levy St. Armand and Joanne Dobson suggest. But the complex and often rebellious portrayals point to her distinctiveness rubbing off on the conventions. Beneath their conforming surface, these poems are often sly, mocking, often daringly blasphemous. Her little girl personae are not exactly identical with the conventional little maids in contemporary women's literature. These little girl figures allowed her "stylistic eccentricities" also. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note this and write: "Child mask enabled her to write a great deal of innovative poetry full of grammatical mistakes and stylistic eccentricities such as only a mad child could write" (Madwoman 591).

Woman as wife in a number of poems also links Dickinson with her contemporary women poets. Woman as wife was a popular figure in women's literature of the time. Dickinson also uses this figure in a number of poems. Often she uses her also as a multifaceted symbol. Her wife persona far transcends the conventionality and limitations of the image in contemporary women's literature. The wife speaker in poem 199 raptures over her married state as it offers her a sense of power and identity unavailable to the single woman: "I am 'Czar'- I'm 'woman' now-". But the stereotyped ideas are subtly undermined in

the second stanza where the word "Eclipse" refers to the lack of consciousness and the invisibility of existence demanded of a wife in her society :

How odd the Girl's life looks
 Behind this soft Eclipse –
 I think that Earth feels so
 To folks in Heaven – now –

The safety and comforts of marriage relate ultimately to the safety of heaven. A subtle reading of the lines helps us to see that Dickinson posits life as the price for this safety and security. The conventional elation of the first line evaporates completely when at the end the speaker-wife compares her present state with her past girlhood : "Why compare/I am "Wife"! stop there!". The persona of the wife in poem no. 732 apparently conforms to the social expectation by being timid and submissive and gives up her own worth as mere "playthings" :

She rose to His Requirement–dropt
 The Playthings of Her Life
 To take the honorable Work
 Of Woman, and of Wife– (732)

She extols the "honorable Work of Woman and of Wife". But a perceptive reader keenly feels the quiet sorrow of the wife who needs to relinquish all her potential, her "Amplitude" and "Awe" in uncomplaining silence. A wife's capacity and worth lay "unmentioned" and unrecognised. Poem no. 461 beginning with the line "A wife at day break I shall be" equates the consummation of marriage with death: "Saviour, I have seen thy face before". Christ, Death and husband all converge on the same person, and the marriage experience reduces to the experience of death. The subtle yet forceful tone of irony actually subverts the concept of wifely submission and passivity. The poems beginning with the lines "He found my being-set it up" (603) and "He fumbles at your Soul" (315) also may be interpreted as ironical presentations of the wife's predicament. The

cold and almost brutal language despite surface passivity exposes tellingly how women are mutilated in the name of love. Dickinson quietly shatters the myth of the "ideal woman" also that conceals the real woman. The "Charm" of a woman supposedly lies in her invisibility :

A Charm invests a face
Imperfectly beheld –
The Lady dare not lift her Veil
For fear it be dispelled – (421)

The woman in the poem thus "dare not lift her veil", fearing "lest Interview-annual a want / That Image - satisfies-". Evidently, Dickinson uses the female poetic subjects of her day, but she subtly exposes the myth of true womanhood as exemplified by the conventional wife figures. Perhaps she suggests that woman's life in the accepted mode is actually another name for death.

Dickinson also shares with other women writers of her time some common themes such as secret sorrow, ambivalence to power, etc. (Cheryl Walker 90). But she treats these themes in a very individual way that makes her poems highly characteristic. For instance, Elizabeth Oakes Smith tells us in her poem "The Poet" how the woman poet writes "Lays that make a mighty gladness" out of the hidden "thorn" beneath her "breast" in spite of all their "mournful sadness" (qtd. in Walker 89). Lydia Sigourney also writes about "the ever pointed thorn hidden "in secret" in women's "breast" (ibid 89). Walker also cites from Lucy Hooper's verse revealing this attraction of the secret sorrow :

Oh, how much
The world will envy those whose hearts are filled
With secret and unchanging grief, if fame
Or outwards splendour gilds them! (qtd. in Walker 90)

Dickinson's poem on this theme of secret sorrow offers a very different reading experience revealing a tough intelligence:

Best grief is Tongueless - before He'll tell-
 Burn Him in the Public Square –
 His ashes - will
 Possibly if they refuse -How then know-
 Since a Rack couldn't coax a syllable – now. (793)

Dickinson's spider poems also testify to this individual treatment of conventional themes. The spider as a moral symbol of perseverance, industry and rationality was a popular subject in 19th-century religio-cultural thought (Emily Dickinson and Her Culture 35). Lydia Sigourney's conventional treatment of the spider moralizes on the spider's "untiring skill" and "energy of will" with which she "builds her bower". The spider is an example of reason and courage:

Toiling thro' the gloomiest shade
 Gathereth Vigour from defeat -
 Child of Reason - deign to see
 what an insect Teacheth thee.

(qtd. in Emily Dickinson and Her Culture 32).

Dickinson has written three spider poems; none of them show least didactic trace usual in contemporary poetry. She portrays the spider as an "artist" and as a "Neglected Genius"(1275), perhaps a counterpart of her own isolated and unappreciated poetic self. The emblem of the spider artist in 605 suggests her delight in her art. More importantly she also suggests her stoicism at the prospect of her art being swept away by time's broom just as the gossamer net of the spider seems mere "sophistries" against the dark reality of the housewife's broom:

An Hour to rear supreme
 His Continents of Light-
 Then dangle from the Housewife's Broom-
 His Boundaries - forgot – (605)

Another spider poem links her alienated artistic self with the spider artist "who sewed at Night/without a light /Upon an Arc of White" (1138). Like the spider's net, her art is also mysterious. We have to judge it by "physiognomy", the outside features and understand its meaning each according to our peculiar "Light". This profundity of vision marks her out from her contemporaries.

Dickinson's bird poems also demonstrate her superiority to the contemporary women poets. Identification with the song-bird in a sentimental mode was the socially approved feminine subject in the nineteenth century. Felicia Heman's and Elizabeth Oakes Smith's poems on the topic serve as perfect examples. In Heman's "The Wings of the Dove", bird symbolizes freedom :

Oh for thy wings, thou Dove!
 Now sailing by with sunshine on thy breast;
 That borne like thee above,
 I too might flee away, and be at rest!

The poem continues sentimentalising the poet's desires and fears :

Wild wish, and longing vain,

.
 My soul is bound and held-I may not flee. (qtd.in Walker 46).

Elizabeth Oakes Smith's "An Incident" also follows this predictable sentimental mode. The bird in the poem as Walker argues "first suggests power through the speaker's identification with freedom, and then powerlessness through the rejection of this identification" (Walker 47). The poet laments in a sentimental fashion:

O noble bird ! why didst thou loose for me
 Thy eagle plume ? Still unessayed, unknown
 Must be that pathway fearless winged by thee;
 I ask it not, no lofty flight be mine,
 I would not soar like thee, in loneliness to pine. (qtd. in Walker 47)

Dickinson's bird-poems, however, defy the usual assumption that a woman's poem about a bird is necessarily sentimental. Birds in her verse denote a wide range of connotations and hardly make sentimental identification with the poet's feminine self. For instance, "A bird came down the Walk" (328) demonstrates her surprisingly objective portrayal of natural objects. The bird, as the poet watches it, "bit an Anglemorm in halves / And ate the fellow, raw". Then it "drank a Dew from a convenient Grass – / And then hopped sidewise to the Wall / to let a Beetle pass –". This objective and minute descriptive style stands far remote from Heman's or Oakes Smith's sentimental self-identification. The poem ends with rare artistry in the final stanza depicting how the bird flies away :

And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home –
Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam– . . .

Instead of indulging in usual self-pity, Dickinson often fuses objective portrayal with impersonal reflection as in "Upon his saddle sprung a Bird" (1600). The bird in the poem "crossed a thousand Trees", sat on a "Fence" and then "squandered" his song upon the "Universe". Her musings on the birdsong at dawn in 783 also offer a rewarding reading experience. The first three stanzas describe the gradual increase of the birds' voices with the advancing dawn :

I could not count their Force –
Their Voices did expend
As Brook by Brook bestows itself
To multiply the Pond. (783)

Fourth stanza takes us to reflection from the description. The poet assumes that the music of the bird at dawn is a "Miracle" and is "independent ecstasy / of Deity and Men". The bobolink in 755 is a symbol of undying human spirit in spite of all pain and suffering. The bird goes on singing even if the only tree which is "His spacious Future" and "Best Horizon" is "Clove to the Root" by the

"Farmer". Dickinson's bird poems thus transcend the cloying sweetness or sentimentality of contemporary treatment generally noticed in published women's poetry of the time. She writes on the theme in her individual way unhindered by gender assumptions.

Dickinson is also far ahead of her generation in her stunning psychological insight into the suffering human psyche. The poem "I felt a funeral in my Brain" serves as a classic example. With cool detachment, she analyses the terrible sense of near madness, her alienated psychic experiences through a surreal image of a corpse conscious of its funeral. Here we have all the contemporary conventions of the funeral service; mourners are "seated", service begins, and the dead body is put in the box: "Mourners to and fro/kept trading - trading - till it seemed ..." . But the convention is shattered as no feeling of sublimity, no divine expectation is felt in the final stanza. Instead, there is a total and terrible alienation, and a collapse into the unknown abyss of death:

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then (280)

The poem seems to work on two levels. On the surface, this is a grotesque description of the terrible loneliness of a dying person thrown into fearful oblivion of death and an ironic commentary on conventional poetry on the dead. On a second level, the poem is a penetrating analysis of a mind verging on madness. Death here serves as a metaphor for madness. Such poems place her far apart from the conventional women poets of the time given over to sentimentalities and pieties.

Dickinson's radical language use is now-a-days a commonplace of Dickinson scholarship. Daring linguistic innovations, violations of normal grammatical structure, extremely unconventional use of dash and ellipsis and

many other novel stylistic features impart to her art an unprecedented originality. David Porter in Modern Idiom has shown in detail how Dickinson makes her poems complex and extraordinary beside the standard contemporary verse written by women. Conformity to cultural and literary conventions made the language of the women poets familiar and undemanding. Porter quotes a few lines from a contemporary woman poet Sara Clark published in Springfield Republican:

I leave thee, love; in vain hast thou
The God of life implored;
My clinging soul is torn from thine,
My faithful my adored! . . . (qtd. in Porter 76)

Richard Sewall also includes in his biography of Dickinson some poems by contemporary women poets as examples of popular poetry. A few lines from a poem titled "The Withered Daisies" published in the Springfield Republican on February 19, 1859 also illustrate amply how Dickinson's poems differ radically from such conventional poems :

She flitted like a sunbeam bright
Around our cottage door;
Her footsteps, as a fairy's light,
Made music on the floor.
On every flower of wood or glade
She lavished childish praises,
She loved all things the Lord has made,
But most she loved the Daisies. (qtd. in Sewall Vol. II:744)

Dickinson's poems stand poles apart from such conventional poems. Porter observes appropriately that "Dickinson's quick alien poems with their aggressive language present a radically different reading experience" (Modern Idiom 76). Indeed, she surprises us with her unexpected and often

shocking language use in poem after poem. The world, she imagines, as "Republic of Delight" (1107); "Eternity's vast pocket gets "picked" in her poem. Summer "troubles", and "Eggs fly off in Music" (956). Richard Sewall finds her mastery over words almost Shakespearean : "I would add that she not only learned from Shakespeare ... but achieved comparable results" (Sewall, Life 719). Harold Bloom also in his scholarly work Western Canon (1994) places Dickinson beside Shakespeare (291). Cheryl Walker in The Nightingale's Burden shows how Dickinson's unconventional language use in "I had not minded – Wall–" (398) violates usual expectations of the reader and transforms a poem on the common womanly theme of forbidden love into a sort of surrealist modern poem (Walker 113-15).

Dickinson's stylistic originality is best seen in her intensely abstract and often obscure images. Porter elaborately explores how her unique attitude to experience produces strangely abstract images like "Dots on a disc of Snow" (216), or "Dome of Abyss" (291), or "Furrow on the Glow" (1086), the "Germ of Alibi" (1298) etc. Archibald Macleish thus writes about her strange images:

"Amethyst remembrance", "Polar expiation". Neither can be brought into focus by the muscles of the eye. The "blue and gold mistake" of Indian summer seems to exist somewhere in the visible ... who can describe the graphic shape of 'that white sustenance/despair'? And yet all of these present themselves as images, do they not?-act as images? (Richard Sewall, Emily Dickinson:152)

These images break the utmost limit of language to convey her mysterious sense of reality and reveal her striking originality.

Dickinson's exclusive choice of the lyric genre also marks her distinctiveness. Lyric was a problematic genre for 19th century women writers. Self-expression, an inherent characteristic of lyric poetry, was opposed by the accepted code of femininity. Lyric poetry requires, as we all know, a strong and assertive self. It

was very difficult for 19th century women poets to go beyond the expression of socially approved female feelings and explore true subjectivity. Women writers of the time, therefore, mostly chose novel-writing. The novel allows the "self-effacing" withdrawal that society fosters in women. Most of the practising women poets of the time took to novel and other literary forms because of the inimical socio-cultural condition. Helen Hunt Jackson, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Alice Cary and many others were successful novelists. In fact, nineteenth century saw the rise of the novel to the status of the dominating genre. Perhaps keeping this in mind, Dickinson insisted that the speakers in her poems are not to be treated as real-life persons. But whatever her meaning, unlike others, she occupied herself exclusively with lyric poetry and remained true to the expression of authentic personal feelings. She renounced the prospect of publication and fame and thereby evaded the social proscription on the expression of female subjectivity. She never wrote an extended narrative poem or any novel or prose romance despite its obvious advantages for a literary woman. This certainly sets her apart from most of the familiar women artists of the time and even from her adored models like Elizabeth Barret Browning. Barret Browning perhaps tried to obviate all injunction and prohibition by inserting lyric outbursts about women's predicament within the narrative framework of Aurora Leigh (1858). May be, she made a reasonable compromise between self-assertion and submission in her effort to be successful as a woman writer in the nineteenth century. But Dickinson clung to the lyric poetry as the only medium of literary expression despite her subaltern status as a woman poet. This determination underlines her uniqueness as a woman poet. Sandra Gilbert says in this context : "Emily Dickinson's implicit rejection of Barret Browning's compromise indicates just how 'mad' and 'unworldly' the 'Myth of Amherst' was" (Madwoman 575). Arguing on this point, Gilbert and Gubar also draw attention to the "magnitude of the poetic self-creation" Emily Dickinson achieved through working in the lyric genre that has been "traditionally the most satanically

assertive, daring, and therefore precarious of literary modes for women" (Mad woman 582).

CHAPTER-VI
A ROMANTIC WITH A DIFFERENCE

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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, ^{Dickinson}7). 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 mine¹.

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 empyrean².

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 . . .³

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

¹Some 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).

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

³Keats, Poems. " To J.H. Reynolds Esq.", 93-105.

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
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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)

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