

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.