

# Emily Dickinson as a Lesbian Poet - An Analytical Study

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**ABSTRACT**--This paper primarily focuses Emily Dickinson as a lesbian poet throwing the light on the male dominated society that curbed the women. It further aims to understand the inequality that exists in gender and focuses on power relation and sexuality. It is concerned with the 'marginalization of women. It represents one of the most important social economic and aesthetic references at modern times. Further it examines women from all races, classes and culture. It is also manifesting how Emily Dickinson considers male as a sustained and she completely avoids. This paper will be an eye opener for the present women in the society. As the paper is in progress the reader may understand the hidden qualities, the power and the spirit of the women. It further showcases the self identified lesbian poets, especially Emily Dickinson.

**Key words**-- Emily Dickinson, Feminism, Lesbianism, Races, Classes, Culture

## I. INTRODUCTION

The poet Emily Dickinson was born when the whole country was facing the transition and the intellectual climate was prevalent. Though the period had gigantic intellect, it broke down in a kind of moral decadence and depravity. Emerson came upon the scene to start a new age in poetry while Hawthorne was looking back. In between the two writers, came Emily Dickinson who imbibed the qualities of the above two writers. As a result her moral image stands out in every poem. Allen Tate says,

“Only a few times in the history of English poem has this situation come about, notably between 1580 and the restoration. There was a similar age in new England from which emerged two talents of the first order-Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson”.

Her poems helped to initiate modern poetry is an enigma in the world literature. With the risk of modernist poetry is an enigma in the world literature. With the risk of modernist poetry she could not confirm to the 19<sup>th</sup> century of idea of poetic form. Emily Dickinson, a New England spinster whose work was unknown in her lifetime, was one of American's finest poets. She has been called “The New England Mystic” ( S.T. Clendening). She experimented with poetic rhythms and rhymes and adopted her own form. Her life was uneventful but she enjoyed a full and exciting existence in her imagination. Almost all her poems were published posthumously. Emily Dickinson's poetry exhibits four primary influences;

- The Bible
- The Protestant Hymns
- Shakespeare
- Emerson

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Of these four, The Bible and Emerson were crucial to her. Shakespeare was for her a linguistic and imagistic resource. Hawthorne gave her the inspiration to write some of her finest poems. Emerson's influence was imperceptible with an underlying current of her source.

Dickinson's poetry reflect her loneliness and the speakers of her poems generally are left in a state of want. Her poems also reflect the inspirational moments which are decidedly life giving and suggest her possibility of happiness. She was influenced by the metaphysical poets of the 17<sup>th</sup> century England besides the other four influences. She was an admirer of Elizabeth Barrot Browning and Keats.

Her poems are replete with the imagery of love, death, and nature. The contrast between her quiet secluded life in the house in which she was born and died and death and intensity of her terse poems has provoked much speculation about her personality and personal relationship. It is quite possible that her withdrawal was simply an exaggerated form of artist's quest for privacy, since it coincided with her dedication to the career of the poet. Her poems range from the playfully joyous or lightly satiric to the somber and majestic.

Her love poems present an integral struggle with the masculine aspect of herself. That seems to be the key to her sexual nature, spiritual identity and the creative imagination. Fearing that she would be misunderstood, Dickinson chose not to publish her poems in her life time as her first attempt was criticized by Thomas Wentworth Higginson. So she resisted all her friends from publishing her poems. She had the habit of writing letters to her friend especially Susan which had poems also. It is surprising that she is kept in par with Walt Whitman whose poems were not read by her as she was dissuaded from reading his verse by rumour of his disgracefulness. However her poems were found out after death and they were edited by her sister and 800 of her poems were published. These poems reflect not only her inspirational moments but also her inner passionate moments. Through these poems we come to know Emily Dickinson as a suppressed poet by a society that led her to vent her desperate moments for longing for love and recognition. Hence an attempt has been made to analyze her as a lesbian poet.

## **II. AS A LESBIAN POET**

Emily Dickinson has written a variety of poems that reflect her suppressed desires of her personal life. Rebecca Patterson pointed out in her book on "The Riddle of Emily Dickson" that her sexually charged love lyrics might have been brought a shock wave among the readers. However Emily Dickson's 'Intimate letters to Susan Huntington in Hart and Smith's "Open me carefully" eliminated this doubt. They brought to light the life long intimacy between Emily and Susan Dickson. It has been open discussion among critics whether this intimacy can be labelled 'Lesbian' or 'Romantic Friendship'.

The term Lesbian poetry is confounding. There has been a discussion whether this refers to poetry written by Lesbian or poetry with a certain identified sensibility. It is difficult to know whether all the woman –to-woman relationships that exist in the lives of these poets were explicitly sexual or not.

In 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the Lesbian poems were referred to the poems written by Lesbian and also to the poems exploring and celebrating Lesbian erotic and sexuality from a variety of perspectives. In "Critical History of contemporary Women's Poetry" Alica Ostriker says:

“The extraordinary tide of poetry by women in our time is challenging and transforming the history of poetry.....The self and culture by producing new knowledge about explicating female experience”

This period witnessed many lesbian poets like Lord Judy Graham, Susan Griffin, Andrienne Rich.

The Lesbian poetry, while traced, has primarily two phases – first from the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, women poets were scarce and with the exception of Sappho, Lesbian poets were practically invisible. Second are the recent decades in which women’s poetry had achieved prominence and Lesbian poetry has been the key in moving audiences, beyond aesthetic appreciation and into political action. The critics of this poetry have tried to bring distinction between recent highly politicized Lesbian and a tradition of Lesbian forerunners. The primary aim of this effort is to establish an exclusively immutable pantheon of great Lesbian poets and to recover poetry of erotic writings lost to traditional literary histories through neglect and indifference. This has brought to light the self-identified Lesbian poets like Olga Broumas, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Susan Sherman, Marilyn Hacker and Andrienne Rich. This era witnessed journals like ‘The Ladder’, ‘Heresies’ which were started and supported by feminist and Lesbian poets. During this period, many anthologies of Lesbian poetry were published.

Lesbian poetry is often erotic and intellectual but not in conventional senses. It forms the group of queerer lot, “We women, who write poetry”, says Army Lowell and records her appreciation in “The Sister” of Sappho, Elizabeth Browning and Emily Dickinson.

By 1993, Howe describes Lesbianism as identity and directly links her change in consciousness, as one of the effects of women’s Lesbian poetry. Politics, sexuality, history, autobiography, polemics, biography, aesthetics and gentle persuasion intersect in Lesbian poetry. A sense of separation and disenfranchisement has characterized the world of Lesbian poets.

The civil war has changed the life patterns of Americans. Many men being away in the war front, women have to steer the family. This brought a close intimacy in them and they shared their anxieties, problems among women folk. They reclaimed sentimentalism as a means of empowerment. Hence, women of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the home as a place from control into the world as men. The women writers of this period challenge the negligence of the “Little heart” (Apertino 15). They felt that they would keep faith in women rather than in men. While analysing the erotic poems of Emily Dickinson, Caroline May in *American Female Poems* says, “Poetry, which is the language of affection has been freely employed among us to express the emotions of a woman’s heart.”

This emotional attachment has been the source of her Lesbian poems.

Three anthologies have been published after Dickinson’s death. A few of her poems reveal her erotic passions, suppressed desire and covetous love. Critics have segregated them from other poems. The following five poems have been chosen for deep analysis.

1. Her Breast is fit for pearls.
2. Her sweet weight on my heart.
3. Now I knew I lost her.
4. Frigid and sweet her parting face.
5. To see her is a picture.

The above poems are chosen as they reveal a link to each other. While the first two poems speak of the erotic passion between them, the next two poems express the depression of the poet over the loss of Susan, as she is engaged to her brother Austin. The last poem reveals the continuous passion of Emily Dickson and her recollection of Susan gives her immense satisfaction. The reverie alone gives her life, though she is disappointed with her decisions.

All poems refer her in capital letters “Her” implying the importance she gives. There was a lingering doubt whether Emily Dickson refers to Susan alone or anybody. The letters to Susan establish the fact that she refers only to Susan. Her letters which are suffused with poems carry the same passion. To her “Sue was the only woman in the world” the “woman whom I prefer” (Pollack.342). As the erotic attachment between two women was common, it is discussed even now whether these poems refer to her erotic attachment or homosexual love.

In Victorian New England, Female poets were not allowed to mention or describe woman’s body; but Emily Dickson managed to express her passion through selected imagery. In the first poem, “Her breast is for pearl”, she describes the part of a woman ,but she compares it to ‘pearl’, which is symbolic of purity. Through this she establishes a ground for female attachment by distinguishing between the traditional offerings of men and her own gift. She relents that unlike the ‘Diver’, who represents an active explorer, is unable to take hold of pearls, which has the symbolism of purity. The search for physical pleasure makes it clear of her erotic love.

Using the analogy of ‘sea’ metaphor the poet compares Susan’s breast to pearls. Her unhappiness over not holding her ‘pearls’ reveals the anguish of a desperate lover. Further, she admires even her eyebrows which look like crown to her. She longs to build a nest in her heart and live like a sparrow. Thus she offers a ‘perennial’ shelter, one that promises the return of love. While describing thus, after the sea imagery, she takes up imagery out of lofty constructs “twigs and twine” – love and preservation. Thus, she expresses her longing to be cosy within her.

At this time, she recollects how each one was enjoying another’s company throughout a night in the next poem, “Her sweet weight ....” The line, “Her sweet weight on my heart at night” confirms the homosexual relation between Susan and Emily. Suddenly she realizes, she has lost her by a simple stirring of her body. The word ‘bride’ confirms this. In fact, it is a tragedy that one’s bride has chosen to be another’s bride.

She wonders whether it was a dream that they both spent night together or slipping of her bride. She is unaware of anything, but expects Heaven to confirm it. This has led her to dream of her and she wants to assume the power of weight on her.

The pleasure she had in her company, the rich experience she had, looks like a story. Her faith makes her accept it as real company. Though the poem adapts her own style, the flow of thought is clear. It is not easy to describe the rich experience she had, but in elliptical sentence capitalizing certain words, she has been emphatic in her expression.

The poem starts with a happy note but ends with desperate feeling. a She is aware of the fact that she has lost her Susan , who has been very close to her, but now decides to start a new life with Austin, Emily’s brother. The news paralyses her. She is unable to understand how one can not requit her love and choose a different path. In the next poem, she accepts the fact that she has lost her. She realizes this by her remote look in her face. Her lack of response of Emily’s love is expressed through her face and words.

The word 'alien' is equal to 'forlorn' of Keats' poems. The sensuousness of Keats "Ode to the Nightingale" has influenced her and she feels that she is pushed to the far off lands where man can not dream of reaching. The one word 'Alien' with capital letter makes us feel her nerves.

At the same time, she feels sorry that Susan has joined the strange race which would traverse her through latitudless place. The poem has provided a virtual treasure house of images that she returned to again and again (Ibid-143). She expands these images to play on the very limits of expressions to put into words emotions previously unspoken.

She expresses her rage against her culture and also against her own erotic attachment. She rebelled against the domestic ideology and saw house work as a plebian interference with her writing. So she regrets over the decision of Susan and she wonders when elements are not alerted and when universe is the same, how can one's love be transmigrated. The word 'transmigration' is a metaphysical conceit as the word "implies" passing of the soul at death into another body" (Dic-1074) Susan taking her soul away from Emily Dickson has brought a natural death to her.

She finds fault with God for being so penurious towards her. She is furious that God does not sanction the freedom who toils for it but seems to be satisfied when 'He' is idolized. All Lesbian poets prefer to enjoy freedom from shakles of human life. Andre Lord, referring to this poetry extols over the poems of revelatory distilled experience of these poets.

Once Emily Dickinson wrote "where my hands are cut, her fingers will be found inside (Letter-447). She is unable to accept the fact that such a Susan has deserted her and chosen to traverse through a different path. This makes her question the showers of blessings of God. One should note, her unhappy family life with her father and mother, her secluded life have been the perennial disturbances to her and she has found solace only in the company of her few friends. This reflects the attitude of 19<sup>th</sup> century poets who were vascillating between faith and doubt.

The Lesbian poets of 19<sup>th</sup> century adopted a free rein in their poems. Emily Dickson too "exploded many of the tropes and popular myths of 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry" (walker-181). In her poem "Frigid and sweet her parting face", she is chilled by the 'frigid' face of Susan. The word "frigid" implies the retrospective attitude towards sex. She brings out contrast between frigidity of Susan and to her own feet which was ready to sail like "fleet". Her choice of words and unusual images make her poem picturesque. Her life with Susan was sailing smoothly; but it has anchored in mid sea as the sail has lost its wind. The change of the course of the wind has brought frigidity and stillness in Emily's life.

She condoles that it is the hand of fate that has made her 'alien'. She repeats this phase and points out the reason for closeting herself. Susan's going away from her with frigid face reminds the beautiful lines of Dr.Faustus that recall Helen of Troy, "Was this the face that launched thousands ships And burnt the topless towers of Ilium"

The burning of Ilium is symbolic of burning passion for a woman. Here the topless towers are the broken heart of Emily, who is left alone once again.

Her ego, herself does not want to accept the defeat. Love is reciprocal; otherwise it is acrimonious and revengeful. She does not want to be sympathised. Therefore, she declares defiantly that Susan can not take away the name and fame that Emily has acquired in this World. She daunts at her and questions her viability of adjusting to these worldly riches.

This pretension comes to light in her next poem, "To see her....." just like a lover, she describes her as a 'picture'. She means that Susan would have gone away from her but no one can erase her picture from her mind. To Emily, she has become a frigid picture with fantastic beauty but lifeless. It gives her joy as if one would derive happiness by seeing one's beloved's picture. She experiences the art of music by merely hearing her speech. Melody rings through her conversation. The very thought of her, she knows that gives her pleasure as if she has drunk, "a brimful cup of wine". Emily is as lustrous as Keats. Once again she highlights the fact that Susan is as pure and as innocent as the month 'June' is named after Juno, the wife of Jupiter.

### III. CONCLUSION

She goes one step ahead that not knowing her is 'affliction' but to own her as friend gives warmth to one's heart. This warmth feeling may be different from the warmth she felt by having a nest in Susan's heart, however it gives radiance and happiness as if one is enjoying the radiant rays of Sun. Even unrequited love is precious to cherish, as it enlightens one's mind.

"..... it is a sorrowful morning Susie- the wind blows and it rains into each life some rain must fall and I hardly know, which falls fastest to rain without or rain within..... oh, Susie, I would nestle close to your warm heart and never hear the wind blow or the storm beat again. Is there any turn for me darling and will you love me more if ever you come home.....( Emily Dickinson's Correspondences 'Web )".

This cursory glance of her poems places her in the centre of Lesbian poets. Separating her from Lesbianism, American Literature would lose one great poet. This makes her as a trend-setter of 19<sup>th</sup> century women American poets. A better comprehension of her poems would set a model and thus the researcher has thrown light through a sample of her poems.

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