



## “We must meet apart”: A Study of Man-Woman Relationship in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

*Dr. Suvapriya Chatterjee*

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Gourav Guin Memorial College, West Bengal, India*

*Received 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2020, Accepted 10<sup>th</sup> September 2020, Online 30<sup>th</sup> October 2020*

**Abstract** — This paper attempts to study the representation of man-woman relationship in the poetry of Emily Dickinson that incarnates the poet's unprejudiced and open-minded view of the interconnections between men and women through a poetic expression. Dickinson's life was full of silence and seclusion separated from the hue and cry of the outside world in proximity of her intimate friends. It was a life marked by earnest personal and inmost experience delineating sensitivity in every poem she wrote. Episodes of delight and jubilancy, joys of caring and sharing, agonies of suffering and affliction of her life are recorded faithfully in her works that bring the trials and tribulations of man-woman relationship. Dickinson's preoccupations with human nature, love, death and issues related to gender are explored here in this essay from a critical perspective to analyze the various aspects of man-woman relationship in her poetry.

**Keywords:** Emily Dickinson, Poetry, Man-woman relationship, Gender, Human Nature.

**Introduction:** Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) has played her powerful role in confronting and opposing the emphatically accepted norms that shaped canonical American poetry. Her poetry captures the exaltation and magnification of her resistance by straight forward and unambiguous criticism of the standards and principles that define woman's social position by her marital status. Paul Crumbley observes, “Her fierce defiance of literary and social authority has long appealed to feminist critics, who consistently place Dickinson in the company of such major writers as Anne Bradstreet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich.” (Crumbley, 2001) Dickinson, an iconic figure in American literature had challenged the existing notions of her days and had asserted new roles for women in this society. She has always given more importance to her poetic pursuits than the conventional feminine roles. Her education has given her the strength and courage to make choices in the personal and the professional worlds. Susan Howe asserts, “Emily Dickinson took the scraps from the separate higher female education, many bright women of her time were increasingly resenting, combine them with voracious and 'unladylike' outside reading, and used the combination. She built a new poetic form from her fractured sense of being eternally on intellectual borders, where confident masculine voices buzzed an alluring and inaccessible discourse, backward through history into aboriginal anagogy.” (Howe, 2007, p. 7) Dickinson felt no urge to conform to the social conventions of femininity. Claiming her intellectual authority in a poetic world dominated by male poets, Emily Dickinson had to combat

against the age-old established custom of marriage. Marriage is nothing more than a social contract that brings pain, anguish and frustration for women. In her poems there are ideas about a woman's relationship with men and a possible exposure to various facets of Dickinson's life. Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson opine, “In many cases these verses will seem to the reader like poetry torn up by the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them, giving a freshness and a fragrance not otherwise to be conveyed.” (Todd and Higginson, 2016, p. 2) This is because her poems record her endeavours, success, failures, disenchantment and discontent.

### Objectives of the Study:

1. To study the treatment of man-woman relationship in the works of Emily Dickinson.
2. To evaluate the importance and significance of love in the works of Emily Dickinson.
3. To determine the contribution of Emily Dickinson in addressing gender related issues in her works.
4. To assess the possible challenges that Emily Dickinson had faced in her own life in terms of relationship related issues.

**Research Methodology:** Man woman relationship is a subject that has been of poetic fascination for ages. There are several poems that discuss the pros and cons of man woman relationship. Emily Dickinson was a fervent scrutinizer of human nature and has written about issues that were of

utmost concern to her like man-woman relationship, love, death and life after death: "She herself was of the part of life that is always youth, always magical. She wrote of it as she grew to know it, step by step, discovery by discovery, truth by truth—until time merely became eternity. She was preeminently the discoverer—eagerly hunting the meaning of it all..." (Bianchi, 2003, p. 4) These subjects were delved into by her from different standpoints. My paper will carry on an analytical study of the treatment of man-woman relationship related issues in the poetry of Emily Dickinson by studying in details some of her selected poems.

**Discussion:** Emily Dickinson is of the view that marriage brings strictly circumscribed restrictions for every individual. Particularly she has expressed resentment and repugnance for every move of a customary, ubiquitous marriage. Krishna Sen and Ashok Sengupta informs, "She never married, though she had several enriching intellectual relationships with men like Benjamin Newton, her father's assistant, and the Reverend Charles Wadsworth." (Sen and Sengupta, 2017, p. 101) Being married might have provided her a socially undeniable life and therefore it might be a social necessity to women of her time. However, the living situations of a traditional married life were unacceptable to her. She left behind numerous writings that many might see as signs of her unresolved conflicting ideas on man-woman relationship. One such example is her poem "What if I say I shall not wait":

"WHAT if I say I shall not wait?  
What if I burst the fleshly gate  
And pass, escaped, to thee?  
What if I file this mortal off,  
See where it hurt me,—that 's enough,—  
And wade in liberty?" (1-6)

She expresses a critical view towards established and indisputable relationships and longs to live a life full of liberty. She wants to enjoy the blessings of liberty, to have a fearless and free spirit in her lifetime and after her death. In several of her poems she reveals that marriage is a social construct and openly defies being in such a relationship. Her poems also reveal the hidden secrets of her tragic status of a single woman: "...Dickinson's marriage poems convey much more than just how scholarly Dickinson was. A contextualized formalist study of her marriage poems takes into account the anti-feminist society that she lived in and the reasons why she chose to never marry, spending most of her time in one room in her father's house." (Medhkour, 2014, p. 3) She lived a secluded life for the last twenty-five years of her life writing poems keeping them secret from her family. Sen and Sengupta are of the view, "Though her reclusive nature kept many aspects of life away from her poetry, she was able to use her isolation to delve deep into the existential and emotional conflicts which defined her selfhood as a woman and a poet." (Sen and Sengupta, 2017, p. 104) She

died without tasting the fruit of success and most of her works were published posthumously.

"I cannot live with you" by Emily Dickinson is an intriguing and enthralling poem about why the speaker who is a female cannot live with her male partner and her several associated interests. The poet, who electrified American poetry with breathtaking line breaks and captivating rhymes, confesses her inability to accept her male partner for various reasons. The poem is included in the collection "Poems" (1890) which is Dickinson's first collection published by T. W. Higginson and M.L Todd. The poem was earlier named "Apocalypse" with a varying use of punctuation and therefore gives alternate meaning. The poem is addressed to her lover who is informed about the eye-opening failure of conjugality between them. The poet is afraid of an impending disaster that will certainly be the result of their union.

The first line of the poem is clearly shocking. The poem opens with a clear declaration that she cannot live with her lover. Living with her lover may bring to her the joys of a married life but those joys are for a time being. Those joys would evaporate soon with the heat of the circumstances. The marvels of a happy matrimony would lose its lustre and turn dull and monotonous. Life would appear to them as a caged existence behind a shelf. Another of her love poem echoes the same thought:

"We outgrow love like other things  
And put it in the drawer  
Till it an antique fashion shows  
Like costumes grandshires wore" (1-4)

The poem brings the grim truth of love, life and human nature. The speaker illustrates the situation in a similar manner in the poem "I cannot live with you" with the help of the metaphor of a "sexton". Being in-charge of the churchyard, the Sexton digs the grave to bury dead bodies. If a person was buried alive by mistake, the person could ring the bell within the safety coffin so that the Sexton could bring him out of the grave. So the Sexton is a person who exercises a certain amount of authority over others' lives. In the similar way, after marriage the control over a person's life shifts to some other person's hands. She also compares her tiresome post-marriage life to old cracked porcelain Sevres discarded by the housewife. However, there is an expression of love and affection in these lines:

"I could not die- with You-  
For One must wait  
To shut the Other's Gaze down-  
You-could not-" (13-16)

The same affection continues to shower in her denial to rise with the lover whose face may demean the grace of Jesus's face. Dickinson was conscious of the magnanimity of love in a person's life and also life after death and expressed it in several of her poems. This poem too explores the

interconnections between love, life and death:

"Because You saturated Sight-  
And I had no more Eyes  
For Sordid excellence  
As Paradise" (34-37)

The beloved poet admits that she will fail to experience the joys and pleasures of paradise because she is immersed in the light of her vision of him. Love inspires life which loses its lustre without love. Sen and Sengupta comment, "What distinguishes her poetry is her ability to fuse the opposing states of death and life within a verbal and conceptual economy, giving her poetry the intellectual and emotional subtlety of Metaphysical wit." (Sen and Sengupta, 2017, p.103) Barton Levi St Armand tries to assess her response to love, romance and separation restructuring the forgotten emotions that generated her poetry. (Armand, 1986, p. 3) Dickinson always wanted frantically to be loved and to be worthy of love, she writes:

"LOVE is anterior to life,  
Posterior to death,  
Initial of creation, and  
The exponent of breath." (1-4)

However, she is not unaware of the pain, the anguish and agony that love brings. For Emily Dickinson, "womanhood is identified and equated with the experience of love, with love's "Ecstasy" and "Anguish"... The love a woman can experience is ecstatic in that it brings fulfillment and union... To be a woman in love also means to experience pain" (Carter, 1972, p. 15) The pain that one experiences in love is evident in another of her poem "You left me, sweet, two legacies" where she writes,

"You left me boundaries of pain  
Capacious as the sea,  
Between eternity and time,  
Your consciousness and me." (5-8)

The acute consciousness of the pain related to love destroys her belief on any kind of physical union between a lover and a beloved. The poet concludes with the proposal of meeting apart in the poem "I cannot live with you" which may signify the impossibility of physically being together but the possibility of an emotional wedlock. In order to avoid the disaster of their possible union they could maintain good relations with each other without being together. The same perspective is echoed in another poem of Dickinson where the beloved feels she could do nothing to reach her lover: "But, Moon, and Star,

Though you're very far —  
There is one — farther than you —  
He — is more than a firmament —  
from Me —  
So I can never go!" (13-28)

In "I cannot live with you" there is a realisation that it is possible to comprehend each other without nurturing regrets or bitterness of not being together. Cultivating the value of patience and perseverance, they could enhance the onset of a new journey of an intellectual relationship.

The poem "'I'm wife"- I've finished that-"(1860) is a timeless and thought-provoking poem about the strains in a woman's conscience that is torn between two categories of womanhood: that of a single unmarried woman and a married wife. The poem discloses much about her state of mind during the short journey of her lonely life. She felt disjointed and muddled from the world and from herself. The poem also indicates her uninterrupted battle with the gloominess of stagnation and desolation that plagues her mind and rides her thoughts. For Ashok Sengupta, her life was "... a proof of her poetry that dealt primarily with subjective desires and experiences. The poems are an exploration of emotional and spiritual conflicts and, thus, are attempts to write the self as an experience of art." (Sen and Sengupta, 2017, 101) The speaker tries to dissociate herself from servitude of a wife. However, she feels that an unmarried woman's life is shadowed by the tradition of male-domination and female subjugation in our society. In another of her poem, 'She rose to His Requirement – dropt' she unlocks the issues of limited freedom that a woman enjoyed in Dickinson's time. A woman may long and strive for many things only to meet death at the end. It stresses the restrictive aspects of marriage and the burden of expectations that a society puts on a married woman:

"She rose to His Requirement—dropt  
The Playthings of Her Life  
To take the honorable Work  
Of Woman, and of Wife".(1-4)

Dickinson is aware of a woman's inferior position in the family and society questioning restrictions and limitations of marriage. According to the poet, a small section of the community may feel compassion for the predicament of an unmarried woman but if the truth be told the situation is different. In practice a married woman is always under a man's dominance and command and therefore can never be considered as entirely a self-sufficient and self-sustaining woman in such a social structure. After marriage a woman was expected to sideline her own emotional needs and concentrate completely on her husband. G. Aravind and Dr. S. Ravikumar 164 observe, "The Amherst society of the days of Emily, conditioned by an austere puritan attitude, was chiefly conservative. Women were not allowed to enjoy full open air and had to remain indoor fully covered attending to domestic chores." (Aravind and Ravikumar, 2018, p. 164) It developed malignity in a woman turning her into uncompromising hater of all established rules. This discovery ignited the fire that engulfed Dickinson's self-

contradictory lines and established her firm faith on the deplorable condition of a married woman:

“This being comfort—then  
That other kind—was pain—  
But why compare?  
I’m “Wife”! Stop there!” (9-12)

These lines prove that Emily Dickinson was an incredibly gifted, sensitive, clear-sighted writer with considerable intensity and multifarious interconnection with words. The poem has all the conflict and collision of Dickinson's poetry. During her life her writing was eclipsed and dominated by desolation and solitude. According to Donald E. Thackrey, “Most of her life was lived quietly at home. Gradually she drifted into a habit of seclusion which engendered local legends concerning frustrated love and a dictatorial father, and other gossipy speculations. After her father's death in 1874, which was followed by the invalidism of her mother, she secreted herself in the house and showed an extreme dread of being seen by strangers.” (Thackrey, 1954, p. 1) Her lonesomeness and seclusion were as real as her enormous capability and genius. Neeru Tandon and Anjana Trevedi write, “Emily had tried the society and the world and found them lacking. She was not an invalid and she lived in seclusion from no love, disappointment. Her life was normal blossoming of a nature, introspective of a high degree, whose best thought could not exist in pretence. She let her thought and feeling slip in her accustomed groves.” (Tandon and Trevedi, 2008, 9)

**Conclusion:** Emily Dickinson managed to diffuse and imbue sense of compelling accuracy and authenticity of articulation which anchors her poems to actual life. For Dickinson freedom and space is essential in any relationship and any undue restraint has an adverse effect on man-woman relationship as she has presented in her poetry. Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson observe, “...the main quality of these poems is that of extraordinary grasp and insight, uttered with an uneven vigor sometimes exasperating, seemingly wayward, but really unsought and inevitable.” (Todd and Higginson, 2016, p. 3) She was an incredibly imaginative woman who had a profound and far-fetched connection with literature. Sen and Sengupta write, “Her reclusive life was a measure of her self-possession which was, at the same time, intensely conscious of the life around her. (Sen and Sengupta, 2017, p. 101) Her poetry is worth remembering for its undeniable engagement to integrity and veracity. She wrote nearly 1800 poems most of which were published after her death. Thackrey notes, “Emily Dickinson wrote over fifteen hundred poems during a life which was singular in its dearth of outward events but was more singular still in its abundant and significant inward activity. Living in a constant awareness of the wonder of the universe and the great, mysterious eternity from which one comes and to which one goes, she died on May 15, 1886...” (Thackrey, 1954, p. 8) Dickinson breathed life into her

writing and alighted the blazing fire of sodality, humanness, harmony and unification through her poems.

#### References:

1. Aravind, G., & Ravikumar, Dr. S. (2018). “The Love Poetry Of Kamala Das And Emily Dickinson: Some Insights”. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, 6 (4), 160-165.
2. Armand, B. L. St, (1986). *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society*, Cambridge: CUP Archive.
3. Bianchi, M. D. (2003). “Introduction”. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Jim Manis, A Penn State Electronic Classics Series Publication, 4-6.
4. Carter, C. W. (1972). *In Sumptuous Solitude: A Study Of Method And Design In The Love Poems Of Emily Dickinson*. The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
5. Crumbley, P., (2001). *Emily Dickinson's Life*, America: Modern American Poetry. Howe, S. (2017). *My Emily Dickinson*. New York City: New Directions Publishing.
6. Medhkour, Y. (2014). *Redefining Domesticity: Emily Dickinson and the Wife Persona*. Toledo: University of Toledo.
7. Sen, K. & Sengupta. A. (2017). *A Short History of American Literature*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited.
8. Tandon, N & Trevedi, A. (2008). *Thematic Patterns of Emily Dickinson's Poetry*, Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Dist.
- Thackrey, Donald E. (1954). *Emily Dickinson's Approach To Poetry*, Lincoln: The University at Lincoln.
10. Todd, M. L & Higginson, T. W, (2016). Preface. *Poems*, Anboco.