

Resisting Conformity: The Feminist Undercurrents in Emily Dickinson's Poetry.

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Abstract:

This paper explores the subtle yet powerful feminist undercurrents in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, examining how her work resists the rigid gender norms of nineteenth-century American society. Through an analysis of selected poems, the study reveals Dickinson's strategic use of ambiguity, unconventional punctuation, and introspective voice as modes of quiet rebellion against patriarchal expectations. Her poetry challenges prescribed notions of domesticity, authorship, and female identity, often privileging inner consciousness over social conformity. By situating Dickinson within a proto-feminist framework, the paper argues that her reclusive persona and innovative poetic style function as deliberate acts of resistance. The research further engages with feminist literary theory to demonstrate how Dickinson's work anticipates later feminist discourses. Ultimately, this study positions her poetry not merely as personal expression but as a nuanced critique of gendered limitations, thereby reaffirming her significance in the canon of feminist literature.

Keywords:

Emily Dickinson; Feminism; Patriarchy; Gender Norms; Resistance; Nineteenth-Century Literature; Female Identity; Poetic Innovation; Domesticity; Feminist Literary Theory.

Discussion:

Born in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830, Emily Dickinson grew up in a society that constrained the chances and goals available to women. She rejected the male-defined womanhood that limited women to subservience and instead chose a life devoted to art, defying social pressures to comply to traditional responsibilities of marriage, motherhood, and religious duty. Refusing to allow patriarchal conventions guide her decisions, she chose to remain a spinster and devote her life to poetry instead of getting married. Dickinson chose to live a solitary life in her father's house as a means of escaping the repressive and routine life that women in her era were compelled to live under the rule of men. She was well aware of the sexualized language and women's subservient position in her society, where patriarchy considered women to be less intelligent and unfit for intellectual endeavours (Pollak 29).

Her unorthodox subjects and writing approach questioned the oppression of female authors and emphasised the strength and authority of female writers. But at the time, her individuality was not valued, which resulted in grave mistreatment. Feminist critics such as Paula Bennett, Joan Kirkby, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Judith Farr didn't come across Emily Dickinson's poetry until the mid-1900s. Farr was among the publishers who aimed to bring attention to the works of underappreciated and marginalised women writers (Bennett; Kirkby; Gilbert and Gubar; Farr). Through her poetry, Emily Dickinson rebels against the male-dominated literary establishment. Her unorthodox subjects and writing approach questioned the oppression of female authors and emphasised the strength

and authority of female writers. As an illustration, in her poem "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" (1862) Dickinson challenges the expectations placed on women's poetry by refusing to identify herself or adhere to standards of feminine beauty. Rather, she embraces her distinct voice and originality. "Dickinson's uniqueness was not appreciated during her time, leading to critical neglect." (Bennett, 1989). Since Emily Dickinson rejected the male-dominated literary establishment of her day, her poetry does, in fact, reflect a rebellious attitude. She aggressively opposed the oppression of women writers and demonstrated the power and authority of female literary expression through her unorthodox themes and writing style.

Judith Farr, Paula Bennett, Joan Kirkby, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and other female scholars rediscovered Dickinson's poetry around the middle of the twentieth century, though, and they began to defend it. "These critics argued that Dickinson's poetry was not only a product of her own genius, but also a reflection of the broader social and political conditions of her time" (Gilbert and Gubar 2000). They illustrated how Dickinson's poetry offered a fresh perspective on female empowerment while also challenging the patriarchal standards of her day. Emily Dickinson is currently regarded as a remarkable creative force and a highly acclaimed female artist by both feminist critics and mainstream literary experts. Her poetry has garnered praise from reviewers of a wider spectrum in addition to feminists. Furthermore, she continues to inspire contemporary women writers like Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, and Marianne Moore, demonstrating her influence beyond her own time. By being inspired by Dickinson's legacy, these modern writers have challenged the male-dominated literary scene and achieved notable progress.

Dickinson's poetry helped establish a prominent place for women writers in the literary world by bringing attention to individuals who had previously been disregarded or misinterpreted by patriarchal norms. Dickinson disproves the idea that women are "small" or unimportant, as some male critics have said, as a self-created woman poet. She honours women's artistic inventiveness and their capacity to overcome obstacles, much like a phoenix emerging via lyrical creation from the confines of a small life to one of greatness. Dickinson deftly flips the notion of women's "smallness" in order to highlight the boundless possibilities of female authors. The following passage from one of her poems makes this clear:

"And then – the size of this 'small' life – The Sages – call it small – Swelled – like Horizons – in my vest – And I sneered – softly – 'small!'" (Dickinson 271, lines 13-16).

Dickinson argues in this line that women authors have limitless creative and expressive possibilities, rejecting the idea that women are small.

Dickinson's gender plays a crucial role in the creation of her poetry, providing not just with much of the thematic content but, more significantly, defining her lyric identity or voice. She creates poems about more than just women; in them, she explores her identity as a woman and her identity as a poet. Gender and genre are indistinguishable in her most important and enduring works. In the same way that traditionally manhood and the masculine point of view have provided the emphasis, subjects, and substance of the male poet's poem, her womanhood empowers her poetry and grants her the lyrical strength. Dickinson is ready to go against the grain and effectively break through preconceived ideas about what it means to be a woman, including what it means for women poets in particular to think, feel, and behave. Her poems frequently take an experimental approach, and they are candid and nonconformist in their self-portrayals. She is also a poet of emancipation, as "My life has stood-a loaded gun" shows. Therefore, Dickinson, Plath, and Adrianna Rich stand for three pivotal points in the history of women's poetry—moments when certain female poets made the decision to defy the categories that were imposed upon them in order to take rightfully and shamelessly the title of lyric T, which they knew

was theirs. In many ways, the development of women's poetry in America over the past 20 years has been a large-scale recapitulation of the events that occurred in each of the lives of these three poets, as women have finally accepted the power that has historically been denied to them by social (literally) and psychological attitudes as well as by their own inhibitions.

Emily strives for independence and parity in rights with men. Her love and natural worldview are all reflections of the feminine impact on her life, which is most manifested in her outlook on life and her quest for the unrestricted environment of creation. Dickinson rebelled against the stereotype of the typical woman in her poem "My life had stood—a loaded gun" (Dickinson 754). Dickinson saw her own life as a loaded gun. Her living area, which included a house, a courtyard, flowers, grass, and trees, had transformed into a spiritual paradise where she was free to express her love and self-pursuit. In this relaxed and liberating setting, she wrote the poetry she had been dying to write. Only poetry, in Emily Dickinson's perspective, could give her a sharper and more distinct mind. She aspired to be a self-actualizing poet who could produce poems and develop in an independent society. This was only a spiritual force that helped her to write poetry in a world dominated by men despite different forms of interference and her tiny female physique. Dickinson articulated her longing for a free world in her poems:

The grass so little has to do —
A sphere of simple green —
With only butterflies to brood —
And bees to entertain. (Dickinson 333)

Dickinson experienced a free world rather than loneliness when she was removed from the commotion, and she experienced security and an open place for creation to grow freely when she destroyed herself (Johnson 187).

Emily Dickinson was aware of the position of women in society, and her poems implied that women who were less than men were reliant on males. Additionally, women were considered second-class citizens with few rights in the fields of politics, society, and the economy. Dickinson, on the other hand, disapproved of men's dominance and questioned conventional wisdom, which demonstrated her realisation that women held the lower rank. (Gilbert and Gubar 24).

Emily Dickinson's poem "I cannot live with you" explores the reasons the female speaker, who is a woman, finds it impossible to coexist with her male companion and all of her related interests. The poet, whose amazing line breaks and enthralling rhymes revolutionised American poetry, admits that she can't accept her male spouse for a variety of reasons. The poem can be found in Dickinson's first collection of poetry, *Poems* (1890), which was released by M.L. Todd and T. W. Higginson. The poem's previous title, "Apocalypse," has a different sense due to the varied punctuation. The poem is addressed to her partner, who is made aware of the shocking breakdown of their marriage. The poet fears that their coupling would undoubtedly lead to an imminent catastrophe.

The poem's opening line is undoubtedly startling. She states unequivocally in the poem's opening line that she cannot live with her partner. She may experience the pleasures of marriage by living with her partner, but those pleasures are fleeting. The heat of the situation will soon cause such joys to fade. The wonders of a blissful marriage would become drab and routine. To them, life would seem like an imprisonment inside a bookcase. The same idea is echoed in another of her love poems:

“We outgrow love like other things
And put it in the drawer
Till it an antique fashion shows
Like costumes grandshires wore” (1-4) (Dickinson, *The Poems*).

The poem depicts the harsh reality of human nature, existence, and love. In the poem "I cannot live with you," the speaker uses the metaphor of a "sexton" to explain the predicament in a similar way. The Sexton, who is in charge of the churchyard, prepares the grave for interring the deceased. In the event that someone was inadvertently buried alive, they may call for help from the Sexton by ringing the bell within the safety coffin. Thus, the Sexton is an individual who has some degree of control over the lives of others. In a similar vein, a person's life becomes more in the hands of someone else following marriage. She also likens her tedious life after marriage to old, broken porcelain dishes that the housewife would throw away. Nonetheless, these phrases contain a statement of affection and love:

"I could not die-
with YouFor One must wait
To shut the Other's Gaze down
You-could not-" (13-16) (Dickinson, *The Poems*).

The poetry "I've finished that; I'm a wife"(1860) is a classic and provocative poem on the tensions that arise in a woman's mind when she is forced to choose between being a married wife or a single, unmarried woman. The poem shares a great deal about her mental state throughout the little period of her solitary existence. She felt confused and detached from both the outside world and herself. The poem also depicts her unrelenting struggle against the gloom of desolation and stagnation that haunts her head and consumes her thoughts. Her poem captures a woman's experiences with identity issues and her wish to break free from the grasp of a male-dominated society in a time when women were not seen as independent, thinking beings but rather as someone who first gets their identity from their parents and then from their husband. As she addresses marriage, Simone de Beauvoir correctly states:

There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband- or in some case a protector is for her... She will free herself from the parental home, from her mothers, she will open up her future not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, into the hands of the new master ..." (Beauvoir 478).

Dickinson emphasises in this poem how a girl becomes a woman after marriage. It demonstrates the constant transformation of a woman's identity—from that of an unmarried girl who is reliant on her father to that of a "married woman" who is dependent on her spouse. Her life was "... a proof of her poetry, which dealt primarily with subjective desires and experiences," according to Ashok Sengupta. The poems try to write the self as an artistic experience by delving into emotional and spiritual problems. (Sen and Sengupta 101) The speaker makes an effort to distance herself from a wife's service. She does, however, believe that the legacy of male dominance and female enslavement in our culture casts a shadow over the life of an unmarried woman. Another poem by Dickinson, "She rose to His Requirement - droppedt," addresses the problem of women's restricted independence at the time. A woman may have many desires and aspirations, but in the end, she will meet death. It emphasises the limitations of marriage and the weight of social expectations placed on married women:

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

Dickinson is conscious of the subordinate status of women in society and families and questions the constraints and limitations of marriage. The poet claims that although some people in the community could have sympathy for an unmarried woman's plight, the reality is otherwise. In such a societal framework, a married woman can never be fully seen as independent and self-sustaining since she is in

reality always subject to a man's authority and control. Once a woman was married, the expectation was that she would put her husband's wants before her own. Amherst society during Emily's time was predominantly conservative due to a strict puritanical mindset. Women were required to stay indoors, covered, and to take care of household responsibilities. They were not permitted to enjoy the great outdoors. (Aravind and Ravikumar 164). It caused malignancy in a lady, making her an unyielding opponent to all norms. This revelation confirmed Dickinson's strong beliefs about the appalling state of married women and kindled the fire that consumed her self-contradictory lines:

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

These lines demonstrate Emily Dickinson's extraordinary talent as a perceptive, sensitive, intense writer with a wide range of connections between words. All of Dickinson's poetic conflict and collision are present in this poem.

According to Emily Dickinson, each person's marriage brings with it very specific limitations. She has specifically voiced disgust and contempt for every action of a traditional, common marriage. "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 101). It's possible that marriage gave her a socially indisputable life, making it a social requirement for women in her era. Nonetheless, she found the living arrangements of a conventional married existence intolerable. Many of the papers she left behind could be interpreted by many as indications of her unresolved contradictory thoughts about the man-woman relationship. Her poem "What if I say I shall not wait" is one instance of this:

“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 displays scepticism regarding long-standing, unquestionable relationships and yearns for a life of freedom. She want to live a life filled with the blessings of liberty and to pass away fearlessly and freely. She "rose to his requirement dropt" in her subsequent poem. She takes a strong stand and criticises the idea that a woman must forget her needs, wants, and likes when she gets married. She criticises the idea that a woman must simply give up everything she formerly held dear and follow the "honourable path" of becoming a "wife and a "woman," as defined by patriarchal confines, one day. In addition, a woman is forced to repress her wants after marriage in order to meet the requirements of the family as a whole. Furthermore, not even those sacrifices are accepted. Rather than coming from her own self, her identity stems on her married status. She is never perceived as a thoughtful woman. "Title divine-is mine!" is another poem that is similar. Dickinson skillfully employs irony in this poem. Says she:

Title divine- is mine!
The wife-without the sign!
Acute degree-conferred on me---
Empress of Calvary!
Royal- all but the Crown.”

The poet illustrates how a woman's title of "wife" alone is a crown, but the responsibilities that come with it are everything from "royal." According to Dickinson, women are like Jesus Christ, who was

executed on Calvary because he had done no wrong. In the same way, the institution of marriage crucifies women. When Dickinson states, "Acute degree conferred on me---," she is implicitly criticising the legitimacy of the holy ceremony of marriage. She suggests that holy matrimony is not a happy place but rather a harsh penalty for no fault of her own. She openly challenges being in a married relationship and indicates that marriage is a societal construct in a number of her poetry. Her poetry also divulge the dark details of her unfortunate single status: "...Dickinson's marriage poems convey much more than just Dickinson's academic prowess." Her anti-feminist culture and the reasons behind her decision to remain single, living mostly in her father's room, are considered in a contextualised formalist analysis of her marital poems. (Medhkour 3) For the latter 25 years of her life, she wrote poetry in solitude and kept them a secret from her family.

"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, 104) The most of her writings were released after her death, and she never got to enjoy the rewards of fame. Emily Dickinson was aware of the position of women in society, and her poems implied that women who were less than men were reliant on males. Additionally, women were considered second-class citizens with few rights in the fields of politics, society, and the economy. Dickinson, on the other hand, disapproved of men's dominance and questioned conventional wisdom, which demonstrated her realisation that women held the lower rank. Feminist gender criticism holds that most people in today's patriarchal culture don't really care about the viewpoint of women, and that historically, women's positions have been subordinate to men's. The poem "Success is counted sweetest" (Dickinson 67) uses death as a metaphor to represent women's segregated social status, illuminating this secondary function of women in society. Dickinson describes women's experiences in society as silent and distinct in her first-person narrative. Women's lives are full of loneliness because of this separateness, which is exemplified in "Success is counted sweetest" and is reinforced by men's estrangement of women in patriarchal society.

Emily uses her personal strength to demonstrate to us in *I Took My Power in My Hand* how to stand up to others and be a special soul.

I took my Power in my Hand
And went against the World—
'T was not so much as David —had—
But I—was twice as bold—

I aimed my Pebble—but Myself
Was all the one that fell—
Was it Goliath was too large—
Or only I too small?

She is equating herself with "David" and "Goliath" in the poem. Individual strength is demonstrated through the conflict between one's spiritual and physical selves and the dilemma of one's own situation. Once more, a hand is considered a "Synecdoche," a portion of the body that represents the entire. The poem gains significance when the four words "Power," "Hand," "World," and "Pebble" are capitalised. She uses the peculiar capitalization in the poem. She offers us individual power in the first verse, and by utilising that power to oppose and stand against everyone, she gives power a materialistic quality and makes it seem like something we can possess. She links the strength to the biblical figure of David, describing him as the Philistine Goliath who was, in one legend, slain by David (1 Sam. 17). She believes that her strength surpasses that of David, citing a "Biblical Allusion" (Drury, 1995, p. 16). In the second verse, she also attempts to warn us that our individual power may not hold and that we may fall. She does this by bringing up the biblical tale of David and Goliath, which reveals her inner conflict and her scepticism of the narrative. She then draws a connection between herself and Goliath; the poem

then moves on to individual comparisons with other people. This stanza maintains the biblical allusion with Goliath (Drury, 1995, p. 16).

Because Dickinson is so elusive, she chooses to pursue autonomous, equal love rather than succumbing to the constraints of traditional marriage. Dickinson acknowledges feminine self-consciousness in her well-known poem "Wild Nights". She fearlessly and honestly showed her love:

Wild nights! Wild nights!
Were I with thee,
Wild nights should be
Our luxury! (Dickinson 249)

After two futile romances, she decided to live a celibate life and forgo marriage and childbearing. She didn't want to become dependant on men or give up the prestige she deserved. All she wanted was to stay true to herself. Her rendition of "I'm 'wife' — I've finished that —" (Dickinson: 199) is a masterful example of a female performer becoming conscious of her family position. The phrase "I am a 'wife!'" "Stop there!" brought the poet's doubt and sarcasm towards the way society and customs had positioned women's roles and values to a head. This implies that marriage is not the only safe and pleasant lifestyle option, and that women should be well conscious of their position in the marriage, tied to their husbands. From the start, she led by example by eschewing the constraints of matrimony and avoiding the box of a patriarchal wife and mother. She was bursting with creative energy and the need to express herself on that basis.

Dickinson's poetry validates female sexuality and feminine experiences that patriarchal society and literary traditions rejected and denigrated. She becomes an ancestor's voice encouraging women to discover their own language and reach self-fulfillment by refuting the idea that women are only objects to be owned and spoken about (McNeil 36). Her poetry explores the difficult relationship women have with their identities as well as the fight for independence against patriarchal norms. Dickinson's poems convey the anguish of defining oneself as a female artist, the denial of women's agency in expressing themselves, and the suppressive femininity that confines them to submissive roles and domestic duty (Kirkby 76). Emily Dickinson questions traditional poetry language and style, which can stifle the creativity of women. Although her manner was criticised by others, such as Thomas Wentworth Higginson, her distinct style helped her become a well-known and powerful woman poet (Leder and Abbott 189). Adrienne Rich, Sandra M. Gilbert, and Susan Gubar are feminist critics who see Emily Dickinson's poetry as a force for subversion and empowerment among women. Her poetry offers a new framework for relationships between the sexes and questions established gender norms (Dickie 344).

In conclusion, Emily Dickinson's poetry is a powerful illustration of her defiance of the patriarchal standards of her day. Dickinson disregarded the expectations that society placed on women by consciously choosing to be single and concentrating on a solitary existence devoted to literature. Her art reflects a strong critique of these limitations as well as a profound knowledge of the limited positions that are open to women. Dickinson's examination of subjects like autonomy, feminine identity, and marriage criticism highlights her feminist undercurrents. In order to challenge and upend the male-dominated literary hierarchy and promote the acceptance of women's intellectual and creative abilities, she wrote poetry. Her place as a key character in the canon of feminist literature has been cemented by the rediscovery and re-evaluation of her work by feminist critics of the mid-20th century. Her legacy continues to motivate contemporary female writers, demonstrating the value of opposing repressive systems and the strength of female creativity. Emily Dickinson's literary voice is as potent today, reaffirming the importance of women's experiences and the demand for complete representation of them in writing. Dickinson not only made a name for herself but also cleared the path for a new wave of female poets with her avant-garde and nonconformist writing.

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