ECO-FEMINISM IN EMILY DICKINSON’S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Eco-feminism which is a “new term for an ancient wisdom” grew out of various social movements – the feminist, peace and ecology movements - in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Eco-feminism represents the coming together of the radical ecology movement and feminism. Eco-feminism is a branch of feminism that is concerned not only with the subordination of women but also the environment. The domination of both women and nature are deeply connected to one another. According to eco-feminists, the female has always been linked to the natural. The consequences of this are that both nature and women face are controlled and managed by men for “progress”. Eco-feminism developed in response to the devaluation of women in society. Nature is seen as being less important than culture or science, and this is just one of many dualisms that eco-feminism deals with. The destruction of the environment and the oppression of women are easy to do because nature and women have been objectified as “others”. In the light of this crisis, it is essential that the feminine should be restored for natural, personal and social wholeness and the position of woman and nature be revalued.

Emily Dickinson was a product of the New England tradition of moral Calvinism. Emily’s childhood was not so different from the early years of many New England girls in the nineteenth century ideal of American womanhood. In the U.S., in nineteenth century, women were considered inferior to men. It was widely accepted that men dominated the realm of writing, so female writers were few. Dickinson’s attempts to create herself, therefore, had to do with finding a way to be a woman who had authority and authenticity in relation to all that are external to her. Her poems reflect this sense of rebellion and revolution against tradition.

Dickinson’s poems, “I’m Wife, I’ve finished that”, “I Gave Myself To Him”, “Title Divine is Mine” depict marriage as an act of oppression against women who were subjugated by men. Their efforts were to maintain control of the opposite gender through social relations and domestic labour. Dickinson’s love for mankind in her nature poem embodies her great concern for human beings’ living conditions. She portrays nature as the “gentlest mother” who never relaxes her vigilance, a diligent housewife who swings “colourful broom” and cleans the water pool. Men cannot be closely related to nature as women. Dickinson’s real representatives lie in her incomparable flexibility, her ability to be, by turns, coy, fierce, domestic, romantic, pro-feminist, anti-feminist, prudish, and erotic.


INTRODUCTION

Various social movements like the feminist movement, peace and ecology movements came to light in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Out of these social movements, a “new term for an ancient wisdom” also emerged which was called “Eco-feminism”. Eco-feminism represents the union of the radical ecology movement and feminism. The term was first used by Francoise D’Eaubonne. According to Eaubonne, there is a direct link
between the oppression of women and derogation of nature; women and nature are not separate entities. There was a massive gathering in large numbers at Three Miles Island in the USA which is considered as the first Eco-feminist conference. One of the conference organizers, Ynestra King, wrote in March 1980 at Amherst: “Eco-feminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and of every living thing.” In 1975, Rosemary Reuther in her book “New Woman/New Earth” wrote: “Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination.”

Eco-feminism is a branch of feminism that deals with the degradation and subordination of both women and the environment. There is inter-connectedness between the two. According to eco-feminists, the females have historically been linked to the natural, and what the consequences of this are as both nature and women face attempted control and management by men for “progress”. Eco-feminism developed in response to the devaluation of women in society. After the Victorian Era or Industrial Revolution, Science dominated the scenario. Nature was hence considered inferior to science or culture. Eco-feminism deals with this dualistic attitude: the gap between production and reproduction, reason and emotion, mind and body, public and private, and man and woman. Men are treated and alienated with the “superior” part of this dualistic attitude i.e. culture/science, production, reason, mind and public. Women are synonymous with the “inferior” side of the attitude, i.e., nature, reproduction, emotion, body and private.

Eco-feminist Ariel Kay Salleh pointed out that men’s hatred against women led to their hatred against nature. Men objectify nature and women and hence they see a similar connection between ecology and feminism. Man destroys and ravages the environment in the name of development. Men also oppress and exploit women because both nature and women have been objects of pleasure and are termed as “others”. In the light of this crisis, it is essential that the feminine should be restored for natural, personal and social wholeness and the position of woman and nature be revalued.

Emily Dickinson was a product of the New England tradition of moral Calvinism. Her dissatisfaction with her Calvinistic origins and tradition led to her questioning most of its theology and discarding much of it. Dickinson was born in a religious family, and her father was a Christian. Emily’s childhood was not so different from the early years of many New England girls in the nineteenth century ideal of American womanhood. Emily Dickinson chose to devote herself to the pursuit of great art and thus challenged and rejected the psychological and social images that were bestowed to women of that era. Dickinson said, “If wife is my entitlement, then can I be a poet? What is good for obtaining a family, but losing soul?” Women in Victorian age were not happy because they did not have any right in the society, but wasted their life in the emptiness. Women were the toy of their husbands. In the U. S., in nineteenth century women were politically considered inferior to men. It was widely accepted that men dominated the pains of writing, so female writers were few. Dickinson’s attempts to create herself, therefore, had to do with finding a way to be a woman who had authority and authenticity in relation to all that are external to her. On the other hand, Dickinson found herself attracted to those already in possession of that power: to strong male figures like fathers, husbands, judges, generals, editors, clergymen, and, of course, God. She would have no separate identity if she gave herself over to them. So she struggled to make a new space for herself. Emily did not acclimatize with society. She did not feel that society had any right to dictate to her the terms and conditions that would rule her life. Emily’s poems reflect her sense of rebellion and revolution against traditional norms.

Majority of Emily Dickinson’s poetry are commentaries on the roles and experiences of women in a patriarchal society. Feminist critics believe that some of her poetry was influenced by the women’s right movement and can be
interpreted as Dickinson’s opinion of gender issues. Dickinson’s poems and letters have been examined by many feminist scholars in order to get an insight into how the poet responded to the gender restrictions of the mid-nineteenth century patriarchal society. The feminist critics have come to the conclusion that while Dickinson has given in to a life of social marginality and seclusion as a person, she has opened a new frontier of feminine power and assertiveness, as a poet, through her transcendent and imaginative verse.

In Dickinson’s poem, “I’m Wife, I’ve finished that”, it showed the woman’s difference of freedom when they are married and have not married. In this poem, Dickinson presents a very intricate approach towards marriage. In the first stanza, Emily shows that if she becomes a wife, she will finish all that she had done. Women are given the title and label of ‘Wife’ whereas a man is called a ‘Czar’. This highlights the contrast between the two that “a woman can never be” and “a man can”. The change a woman goes through from childhood: “girl” to womanhood; “Wife” characterized by an “Eclipse” in the second stanza. This clearly brings out the inequality of man and woman. It is natural for “woman” to stop at “wife” because as a wife the women must go along with her husband. There is no freedom as being a woman they cannot do anything without the interference of others. A woman can become a “Czar”, but a “wife” can only become a wife with the adoration and approval of her husband. Often, there is the intimidation of the wife by her own husband in their household. Her life is dominated by her own husband. She is in flux having never married and never having a domineering male force in her life, except for her constant issue with her religion or faith which was dominated by men in those times.

In the poem, Dickinson presents a very intricate approach towards marriage. In the first stanza, she writes:

*I’m ‘wife’-I’ve finished that

*I’m ‘Woman’ now- It’s safer so.

Here, she means that now that she is married, she has become a complete woman. She is trying to convey the message that every girl ought to get married in order to gain ‘wholeness’ or ‘completeness’ in life. In the first three lines, Dickinson presents an opinion that supports marriage. But in the last line of the first stanza, she writes “It’s safer so”. The message that she wishes to put forward is ironical. It was a norm in the mid-nineteenth century for a girl to get married, have a family, have children and have a typical lifestyle. Thus, she would be ‘safer’ and most secure of her own identity. In the last line, Dickinson mocks the society for pressurizing girls to get married.

In the second stanza, Dickinson called the institution of marriage as an “eclipse” on a woman. Emily is unsatisfied, but culturally obligated towards this institution of marriage. Here Dickinson plays the feminist because she says it is better to be “Woman” rather than “Wife”. In this stanza, she compares the single vs. married issue to the earth vs. heaven scenario. Being single is represented by the ‘harsh’ life and realities of the earth and a married woman’s life is compared to being in ‘Heaven.’

Emily Dickinson finds insecurities on becoming a woman, than security. She does not want to be a wife or a woman therefore she puts these words in quotes because they seem strange when compared to her. She relates this to her family life because her father never expected a woman to become anything and Emily rejected her mother’s identity by emphasising in her poems that she was an orphan. In this poem, she fantasizes that she has entered into a marriage of some kind. She seems to be mocking ‘marriage’ of all sorts.

Emily describes her feelings about marriage in the final stanza. Marriage will bring comfort. Emily points out that the natural progression of a girl’s life from willfulness to marriage is “the soft eclipse”. She sees marriage as an escape
from pain. The last stanza begins with the lines,

*This being comfort-then*

*That other kind was pain.*

The two lines convey a mixed signal, suggesting that married life is finally painless or completely opposite to it. Emily is unsatisfied with married life basically. Therefore, she keeps comparing herself as she says “why compare?” from the beginning to the end of the poem. The last line, “I’m Wife! Stop there!” sounds as if a man is ordering her. She ends with a cynical tone that pain comes only with independence; hence, it is natural for women to stop at “Wife”. The poem ends with a positive note towards marriage where Emily says there is no need to compare both the scenarios since she is now a ‘Wife’. She reiterates the word ‘Wife’ to represent her status. In this way, she mocks at the sexist society of the middle nineteenth century for pressurizing girls to get married, have a family, have children, and have a typical lifestyle.

In the nineteenth century, women were primarily raised to be accommodating housewives, bound to the household duties of everyday life and social conventions. Dickinson found herself within this time period, which saw the dominance of the patriarchal society which continued the division of both genders. Dickinson was able to break away from these social conventions through her own writing and poetry. In the nineteenth century, writing became the medium of expression for many women as it was one of the few mediums of self-expression that were available for women. Emily Dickinson’s poem, ‘I gave myself to Him’ illustrates marriage as “a solemn contract” between a woman and her husband where she depicts the husband as nothing more than a customer. A woman exchanges herself via marriage for financial security. In the same way, “Title Divine is Mine” condemns the presence of love in marriage as women are “Betrothed-without the swoon”. The two poems depict the subjugation of women by men and marriage as an act of oppression against women. The poems depict the men’s efforts to maintain control over women through social relations and domestic labor.

It was expected that females should maintain sexual purity until the day of her marriage as virginity was the most essential value of a woman. A woman belonging to the upper class of society was also expected to uphold her purity by remaining faithful to her husband as the most primary duty of a woman along with fulfilling her social obligations was fidelity. The opening lines of Dickinson’s poem, “I Gave Myself To Him” emphasizes this expectation, “I gave myself to Him-/ And took Himself, for Pay”. The narrator of the poem is a newly-wed woman. She has fulfilled her first step as a wife by giving herself completely to the man, who is her husband. The same commitment is not expected of the husband, who only “took himself, for pay”. The patriarchal society does not expect the same obligations from a man that are expected of the woman.

The first two opening lines illustrate marriage as an exchange of a life rather than as a spiritual or emotional bonding of two lives. The word ‘marriage’ is not mentioned in the poem. In the third line of the poem, it is mentioned as “The solemn contract of a life”, with an emphasis on the word “life”. It is evident from this that marriage is the “contract” where she has given her “life” in exchange for financial security. Despite her exchange, the woman is still in “debt” to her husband vide the contract. The poem ends with the lines “Sweet Debt of Life-Each Night to owe/ Insolent-every Noon”. Although she surrenders herself completely to her husband, she is still portrayed as inferior because of her role in society and her financial dependency. This male dominated society gave her the tag of “inferiority” as she was a female.

In the poem, “I Gave Myself To Him”, the speaker, does not even use the word “husband” but the word “purchaser”. The speaker says that the wife is no longer a person but a product as she has been purchased by her husband.
The speaker compares herself to a product as she is aware of her role in society. “In her observation of married woman, her mother is not excluded, she saw the failing health, the unmet demands, the absenting of self that was part of the husband-wife relationship” (Lowell). In marriage, Emily saw a loss of self-identity where the wife makes all ends meet to fulfill her husband’s demands rather than her own desires.

The word “husband” is not used to describe the wife’s husband; rather, she uses the words “purchaser” and “merchant”. These words create an image of a transaction, a customer buying the product, rather than a man marrying a woman. Emily didn’t just depict marriage as an act of oppression against women, but as form of degradation. The women are no longer seen as human, but as cargo. When a woman submits to a husband’s will, it means the loss of independence, and to become a “product” meant losing your identity as a human being.

Dickinson’s rejection of the traditional doctrine influenced her negative views of “traditional” marriage which subjugated women to her husband’s will. In “Title Divine is Mine”, the female speaker rejects traditional marriage because she has seen through the facade of “holy matrimony” however; she does not reject her faith in God. Instead of marriage, she has decided to claim the “Title Divine”. By doing so, she has gained a higher status than the status of a wife because she has not demeaned herself by submitting to the will of a husband.

*Title Divine, is mine.*

The Wife without the sign-

Acute Degree conferred on me-

Empress of Cavalry-

Royal- all but the Crown!

Betrothed- without the swoon.

By rejecting traditional marriage, she has become the “wife” without the (earthly) “sign”; the bride of Christ. She chooses to be the bride of Christ and thus she proves that she still has faith in God, even after she has rejected holy matrimony. As the bride of Christ, she only misses the “crown” on her head like the crown which refers to the circle of thorns placed on Christ’s head before his crucifixion. But even so, she still becomes the “Empress of Cavalry”, which means that like Christ, she accepts “the immensity of the pain” and suffering that comes with her new title, and shows it by “embracing it” (Leiter 215).

In her nature poems, Dickinson depicts nature and the lives in nature. She displays the harmony between man and nature, showing her respect and fear to nature. Dickinson adores nature, because she sees nature as her spiritual escape. Her love for nature arises from her respect for nature and is the beginning point for the love of life and mankind. Dickinson’s love for mankind in her nature poem incarnates her great concern for human beings’ living conditions.

Emily Dickinson was influenced by Emerson’s naturalism and she believes nature is everywhere. She spends most of her time in her garden and chamber, but she would never confine her thoughts in a limited scope. She regularly uses the sensational expressions to shed light on themes related to nature. Dickinson utilizes these common images not to devise some adventurous plot but to praise the beauty of nature. “Images of nature as female are deeply encoded into the texts of American history, art, and literature and function as ideologies for settlement.” Dickinson had written to Mary Bowles, “Nature is our eldest mother, she will do no harm.”
She portrays nature as the gentlest mother:

*Nature- the Gentlest Mother is,*

*Impatient of no Child -*

*The feeblest- or the waywardest-*

*Her Admonition mild-*

*In Forest- and the Hill-*

*By Traveler- be heard*

*Restraining Rampant Squirrel-*

*Or too impetuous Bird-*

(Dickinson, 1891, p. 790)

Nature is, here, personified as the gentlest mother, her vigilance never gets relaxed. Her incomparable love even indulges the “Rampant Squirrel” and “Impetus Bird,” and her admonition becomes “mild”. In poem 219, she compares the striking and beautiful sunset to a diligent housewife who swings colourful broom and cleans the water pool. Dickinson’s attitude towards nature is not like those of Wordsworth or Emerson. She loves nature and tends to praise it and she is scared of nature for its mystery. She is even hostile to it. Eco-feminism considers nature as the mother of our human beings. Women and nature are closely related and this relationship is decided by the physical characteristic and the nature of women. Men cannot be closely related to nature as women (Emerson, 1994, p.54). Emily Dickinson’s poetry illustrated a discontent to men and the idea of marriage. She was able to witness first-hand the way marriage bound women to their respectful homes and made them lose their identity.

It was through poetry that she was able to express her thoughts and creativity. Reynolds argues, “She was unique among American women of her day in the breadth of the most experimental tendencies in contemporary American culture” (Reynolds 112). Her representative stance on gender issues didn’t just represent the typical victim, the struggling woman, or the strong female character, but spread to a larger spectrum of women. Reynolds remarked, “Her real representatives lie in her incomparable flexibility, her ability to be, by turns, coy, fierce, domestic, romantic, pro-feminist, anti-feminist, prudish, and erotic” (Reynolds 128).

**CONCLUSIONS**

Nature is personified in Dickinson’s poems as the gentlest mother whose vigilance never gets relaxed. Dickinson’s incomparable love even indulges the “Rampant Squirrel” and “Impetus Bird”, and her admonition becomes “mild”. She compares the striking and beautiful sunset to a diligent housewife who swings colourful broom and cleans the water pool. Emily Dickinson was influenced by Emerson’s naturalism and she believes nature is everywhere. She loves nature and tends to praise it and she is scared of nature for its mystery. She is even hostile to it. Eco-feminism considers nature as the mother of our human beings. Dickinson’s love for mankind in her nature poem incarnates her great concern for human beings’ living conditions. Women and nature are closely related and this relationship is decided by the physical characteristic and the nature of women. Men cannot be closely related to nature as women. Emily Dickinson’s poetry illustrated a discontent to men and the idea of marriage. She was able to witness first-hand the way marriage bound women.
to their respectful homes and made them lose their identity which is echoed in many of her poems.

She was able to express her thoughts and creativity through her poetry. Reynolds argues, “She was unique among American women of her day in the breath of the most experimental tendencies in contemporary American culture” (Reynolds 112). Her representative stance on gender issues didn’t just represent the typical victim, the struggling woman, or the strong female character, but spread to a larger spectrum of women. Reynolds remarked, “Her real representatives lie in her incomparable flexibility, her ability to be, by turns, coy, fierce, domestic, romantic, pro-feminist, anti-feminist, prudish, and erotic” (Reynolds 128).

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