

Review Article

‘... this Moment Knew – / Love Marine and Love Terrene – / Love Celestial Too –’: The Amorous ‘Female Subject’ and the Curious Love Intrigue in Emily Dickinson’s Verse

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Article History

Received: 17.12.2020

Accepted: 31.12.2020

Published: 06.01.2021

Abstract: The profound poetic renditions, of Emily Dickinson, one of America’s most prolific and original poets, are replete with manifest commendations of the paradoxical ecstasies of an agonizing renunciation. Hence, a number of readers, like Richard Wilbur and others, have considered ‘Sumptuous Destitution’ as the most significant *leitmotif* of her art. Simultaneously, Dickinson happens to be an inebriate of *air*, and perhaps since she writes in a trance caused by such inebriation, she is often rapacious, splenetic and covertly or overtly intransigent. The expression ‘Sumptuous Destitution’ sounds daunting, and almost presumptuous, since it implies a certain amount of voluptuousness (the term having unequivocal implications though) that she is willing to indulge in, even in her penury. A divergent array of predicaments in describing female selfhood in and through language is demonstrated in her oeuvre. Her poems thematizing love are distinguished for their exceptional ingenuity. But, both love and poetry bring for Dickinson a calamitous end. Her love poems are seldom considered as objective demonstrations in relation to the form of traditional lyric poetry. It is these artistic nuances of her female subjectivity and her amorous sensibility that the paper seeks to uncover by a close examination of selections from her verse.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, Female subjectivity, Language, Love, Poetry, Self-expression.

INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson, in her prolific poetic renditions, is replete with manifest commendations of the paradoxical ecstasies of such an agonizing renunciation. Hence, a number of readers, like Richard Wilbur [1] and others, have considered ‘Sumptuous Destitution’ as the most significant *leitmotif* of her art, as is also evident in the work of Emily Brontë and George Eliot. Simultaneously, Dickinson happens to be an inebriate of *air*, and perhaps since she writes in a trance caused by such inebriation, she is often rapacious, splenetic and covertly or overtly intransigent. The expression ‘Sumptuous Destitution’ sounds daunting and almost presumptuous since it implies a certain amount of voluptuousness (the term having unequivocal implications though) that she is willing to indulge in, even in her penury.

A divergent array of predicaments in describing female selfhood in and through language is demonstrated by Dickinson. Her poems thematizing love are distinguished for their exceptional ingenuity:

I gave myself to Him –
And took Himself, for Pay [2]

But a thorough appraisal of such seemingly unpretentious avowals call forth, more often than not, inconsistent interpretations of rejection, paradox or a sincere longing proved unattainable by an inaccessible goal:

The Fruit perverse to plucking
But leaning to the Sight
With the ecstatic limit
Of unobtained Delight [3].

When Dickinson speaks in the ecstatic or otherwise anguished first person that she makes use of in her love poems, she is so ambiguous and deceptive as to evade a conclusive explanation, and hence, the poems become conundrums often with two correspondingly possible responses. This is manifested in an acclaimed and contextually relevant poem:

Wild Nights – Wild Nights!
Were I with Thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

.....
Rowing in Eden –
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor – Tonight
In Thee! [4]

This ardent poem expresses a yearning for someone whose nearness indicates a threatening and an almost impulsive intemperance as well as an absolute detachment from unsettling upheavals – significances that coherently gainsay one another. ‘Wild Nights should be / Our luxury!’ stimulates a release of forcefulness perceived as a forbidden act of reprobation, but it is completely uncertain whether the ‘luxury’ implies the outburst of a passionate ardour or the assurance of a concealment from it. Corresponding inconsistencies are to be fathomed in the second stanza also: ‘You are “done with the compass” when you are safe at home.’ The exuberance contained in the line calls to mind a relinquishment so consummate that the speaker, in spite of being stranded in the midst of the ocean, is no more anxious about where she exists. Contrarily, the connotation of ‘Ah, the Sea!’ is conjectural. The enigma it evokes centres round the question whether the sea symbolizes her lover or separates her from him. If the tempest and the sea exemplify a passionate vitality by the use of ‘I’, they can seldom clearly illustrate the portents she hopes to overpower. This tantalizing indeterminacy is a characteristic of a more perplexing poem:

The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea –
Forgets her own locality –
As I – toward Thee –
She knows herself an incense small –
Yet *small* – she sighs – if *All* – is *All* –
How *larger* – be?
The Ocean – smiles – at her Conceit –
But *she*, forgetting Amphitrite –
Pleads – “Me””? [5]

This aphoristic anecdote of the ‘Drop’, encouraged by love to struggle for her own individuality, is designed on an antithesis. The intricate central stanza appears to demonstrate the dilemma of self-expression. If she acknowledges that the ocean, being boundless, ‘is All’, or in other words, if it already subsumes her, how, ‘she sighs’, can she magnify it? She imperiously desires that the ocean should be immeasurable without taking her into consideration. This demand appears grotesquely presumptuous from the point of view of the fact that the sea has consumed more voluminous matters in comparison to what she could do and it is not inappropriate to distinguish it or him as the sea-god, Poseidon, who already has a wife, the sea-nymph named Amphitrite. It may however seem surprising to discover how such an endeavour of self-expression is intrinsically associated with selfless love and the self-submission that comes from it. The reader’s experience of the poem remains one of contradiction. Dickinson’s poems of love remind us of Andrew Marvell’s ‘Definition of Love’ where love is ‘begotten by Despair / Upon Impossibility’.

Such poems on despair may be hailed as some of Dickinson’s most admirable accomplishments. In ‘There’s a certain Slant of light’, despair comes out thoroughly and conclusively:

There’s a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes – [6]

‘Heft’ implies heaviness, with supplementary associations of dragging, exertion and pressure. The ‘Cathedral Tunes’ become burdensome due to the sombre strain of certitude and demand to be lifted up by the hearers. These suggestions traverse back through a sense of oppression to the winter-afternoon ‘Slant of light’, that is apparently immaculate, yet dispassionate. Dickinson brings these implications together naming them as despair, which she again describes as ‘An imperial affliction / Sent us of the Air –’:

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –

Death comes from the distance and, hence, the two share an intimate association in many of Dickinson's poems, where the non-existence of the lover bears the sensation of death. Distance is impregnated with all possibilities of an impending fatality and such solitude provides the poem with a death-like finality.

DISCUSSION

Love manifests itself in Dickinson's poems in multifarious forms. It is perceptible that she loved intently, rapturously and unswervingly in her life. She sometimes loved exuberantly and, at other times, sedately. She also habitually transcended restrictions. She vacillated between one way of loving and the other just in the manner she dithered to determine expressions that would befit a poem. She cruises along effortlessly across widely assorted attitudes, dispositions and circumstances, creates poetry by the fervour of her imagination, and enacts a vivacious playfulness from an entirely fantasized notion of love. She was indisputably aware of the way in which she could assume the role of a passionate companion, paramour and devotee. She confided to one of her childhood friends, in the concluding year of her life, that she perceived and even 'this moment knew – / Love Marine and Love Terrene – / Love celestial too –'. (7) She spread her love to every domain of life that she could envisage.

The anxiety in Dickinson arises from the fact of her sustained adherence to a prototype that concedes to a binary hierarchy, where the subject is unquestionably the male and the object female, in spite of the fact that a female speaker speaks in these love poems. This seldom implies that the female persona identifies her subjectivity as male; the speaker here, in fact, tries to strike a balance between the dominant male subject and his female 'counterpart' by considering herself as an object. In the following poem, she conceives of a garden, unchanged and yet 'brighter', a place where she urges her endearing brother, Austin, to come from the land where he is:

Never mind faded forests, Austin,
Never mind silent fields –
Here is a little forest,
Whose leaf is ever green;
Here is a brighter garden,
Where not a frost has been;
In its unfading flowers
I hear the bright bee hum:
Prithee, my brother,
Into my garden come! [8]

It is language that reinforces the position of the subject and the object, and ushers in the essence of a heterosexual intrigue. This amorous strain, underlying the relationship between the 'female subject' and the 'male object' (the subversion as is perceivable in the above-quoted verse) is embedded in the patterned metaphorical structure of the poem that is manifestly grandiose and far-ranging. A few familiar comments on the inherent meaning of this interrelationship between romance and metaphor probably indicate the reason why this correlation enhances the dilemma that Dickinson confronts as a female poet. Acceding to the argument of Jacques Lacan [9], the French psychoanalyst, that subjectivity is comprised of and by language, and that to imbibe language is to concede to the social and cultural norms, particularly those that bear witness to patriarchal authority, the French feminist critic Luce Irigaray debates that the hierarchical taxonomy of a signifier and a signified in language reiterates and underpins the subjugation of women and their treatment as object [10]. Irigaray asserts that metaphor characterizes the edifice of language. It pivots on and propagates a hierarchical system of polarization in which one constituent element possesses the prerogative to determine the other. Irigaray's views are in accord with the explanations of Sigmund Freud [11] and Lacan that the position of the woman in this metaphorically designed system of language is basically that of absence, of a deprivation, and the components of language that restate the elements of presence and absence actually, in their turn, replicate the reality of marginalization of women. Hence, when Dickinson deploys the theme of subject-object relationship through the use of such metaphor, she virtually anticipates that by which Irigaray was intrigued.

The thematics of romantic love characterizes Dickinson's early love poems, particularly those that reveal such an ideal of love, expressed with the help of metaphor in which the subject-object relationship receives a vivid manifestation. In her later love poems that were composed several years after her early compositions, and which comprise the verse valentines of 1850 and 1852, and the rhyming end of a letter to Austin in 1851 identified by Thomas Johnson as her second poem, she conceives of ideas as both corroborating and offering a critical assessment of a hierarchical association that lovers share in her earliest poems. In this category of her poetry, the self is considered as

nugatory, feeble and womanly and is juxtaposed against an array of authoritative, evidently male, representations, as distinctively expressed in the poem, 'Mute thy Coronation –' [12], where the speaker is a 'meek' and deferential 'tiny courtier' who conceives of herself as being shrouded in the master's 'Ermine' on the event of his coronation. The diminutive steward appropriates herself in the position of the object, and the metaphorical strain of absence in the hierarchical paradigm of romantic attachments is depicted in a manner in which the menial and the exiguous is desired by the powerful and the significant in the initial valentine. But, in other poems composed almost around the same time, Dickinson endorses a subversive assessment of traditional romantic affinities between the male and the female through a concurrent appraisal of the two-fold organization of language and metaphor. Dickinson envisages a relation between the subject and the object that is imperative to both the schemes of metaphor and romantic love, and essentially to those of signifier and signified that language depicts [13]. It is strikingly noticeable that in her efforts to redress this adversarial pattern of language, Dickinson forces language to the verge of inconsequentiality. Her endeavours to untether the binary opposition of subject and object in romantic associations have confronted corresponding hindrances. As a result, one particular section of her poems seems to conform to the design of the traditional love poems, which can be identified in her earliest poems and persists in the later poems like 'Mute thy Coronation –', to name just one of them. In this section of poems, the dominant male persona, who embodies the characteristic features both of God and of the father, is portrayed as the sun, whereas the frail and insubstantial female self is imagined as a daisy. This traditional constitution of bipolarization, echoing the conventional male-female relationship found in the earlier love poems, is substantiated only to be later disintegrated. Simultaneously, the metaphor that is rudimentary to such an idea of polarity, and is indispensable to the frame of these stereotypical relations, is nonetheless challenged and undone.

In the love poem, 'The Daisy follows soft the Sun' [14], the daisy transposes the ostensible association between supremacy and deference in romantic love, and the metaphor that underpins the design of the poem, along with the relationship it delineates, is unfolded as a misapprehension:

The Daisy follows soft the Sun –
And when his golden walk is done –
Sits shyly at his feet –
He – waking – finds the flower there –
Wherefore – Marauder – art thou here?

The discrepancy between the sun and the daisy, that is essential to their relationship, is metaphorically expressed in a way similar to that in the poem about the Master and the petite courtier. Dickinson tries to draw a parallelism between the daisy and the sun particularly because of a superficial similitude that is evident in the former's name, the 'day's eye'. Such similitude deepens and the flower, whose very name signifies the eye of the day, is described by an analogy in relation to the sun. The effort to unite the remarkable incompatibility between them exemplifies their romantic enchantment as well as the metaphor that presides over the poem. The discernible image that as the sun draws near the horizon, the daisy 'follows soft the Sun' and 'Sits shyly at his feet', bears testimony to the way in which both metaphor and intrigue are at function in the poem through language. It is again with the help of such language that the poet creates an artistic delusion, making the daisy resemble the sun and their relationship seem close and affectionate.

As Dickinson steers towards a clearer and more archetypal culmination of a male-female love intrigue, she presents marriage as a 'soft eclipse'. The speaker here presumes herself as having experienced 'the Girl's life' and rounds off by saying:

This being comfort – then
That other kind – was pain –
But why compare?
I'm "Wife"! Stop there! [15]

When one assumes the role of a wife, it is imperative for her to 'stop'. Stopping implies a cessation in the growth of a woman's life as well as the fact that the poem reaches its finale. Rather than declaring an end to all the apparent contrasts between the conditions of being a wife and those of being a girl, the poem suggests a startling reticence as a substitute for such comparisons.

Though the language here enforces a peremptory silence, Dickinson seldom stops. She remains in a perpetual pursuit to diversify the confines of the observable, the conceivable and the explicable both in experiential and in linguistic terms, though, for her, feeling the physical reality in her mind is virtually the same as experiencing it by actually living it. The essence of Dickinson's poetry is constituted of the rapture and gratification of an amorous male-female relationship where the language bears evidence of a metaphor that comprises an indeterminable dilemma of the signifier and the signified. Hence, love evolves as a symbol of a subjugating force underpinned by such a metaphor that augments that force.

If such a restrictive paradigm of romantic love of the opposite sexes calls for a language that is itself oppressive, constraining and, hence, sometimes nebulous, it may seem plausible that such an affinity between women might hypothetically suggest a felicitous form of experience communicated through a more convenient, germane and expressive language.

The individuality that Dickinson puts forward in her letters was perceptibly male as much as being female. Yet, it is sometimes formidable to allow for such a transformation in poems. Dickinson sent 274 poems to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, primarily her friend and subsequently her sister-in-law, apart from 154 pieces of prose correspondence. Such poems and missives are manifestly self-explanatory since they establish a relationship of uniformity as far as the question of gender is concerned or, in other words, unravel an attempt to disrupt the notion of a hierarchical order by specifying a relationship between two women. The language deployed to convey the intricacies of such a kinship is therefore one that is structured on an identical condition of selfhood, rather than a conclusive experience of detachment. The ideological accent in the poems involving two female personae is clearly on equivalence and homogeneity, perhaps reinforcing the sense of a considerable number of Dickinson's poems as revealing homoerotic closeness. Seldom can such a consanguinity between two congruent units be categorized as conforming to the demands of a hierarchical strategy, none of them being more pronouncing than the other. However, it is perplexing to note that instead of demonstrating a restful equipoise that such a circumstance may presupposingly foster, these poems are typified by Dickinson as having the problem of no imaginable conclusion because of the specific sameness of the two identities concerned. Poem 642 expresses on the one hand, 'We're mutual Monarch', and on the other, 'Myself – assault Me'. Consequently, poem 683 reveals the metaphor of 'the most agonizing Spy' by saying that, 'The Soul unto itself / Is an imperial friend – / Or the most agonizing Spy – / An Enemy – could send –'. Other poems concerning two corresponding female figures apparently bear a similar framework and are based not on contrariness and polarity but on consistency and interchangeability, thus often leading to an acute and an overwhelming impasse.

CONCLUSION

However, there are both conveniences and hindrances in such poems that delineate both the subject and the object as female, as in the case of 'Like Eyes that looked on Wastes' [16]. Such an approach reveals both the affirmative and the negative aspects of life as well as of language. The penultimate lines of the poem, 'Neither would be a Queen / Without the other –', reveal this poem to be an interaction between two female characters, though this poem was not one of those dispatched to Susan. There is, arguably, no possibility of any idea of a hierarchy owing to the fact that none either *is* or *is not* a queen. Yet, a perception of an appalling lack becomes clearly discernible. The poem begins with a sustained analogy between 'Eyes that looked on Wastes' and the manner in which the two personae behold one another. There seems to be a corresponding requital of observation among them:

So looked the face I looked upon
So looked itself – on Me –

Here the subject-object polarity ceases to exist and their images produce indistinguishable mirror reflections:

But Blank – and steady Wilderness –
Diversified by Night –

Just Infinites of Nought –
As far as it could see –

The poem concludes with a combination of contradictions arising from this reciprocal gaze:

The Misery a Compact
As hopeless – as divine –

Neither – would be absolved –
Neither would be a Queen
Without the Other – Therefore –
We perish – tho' We reign –

The dearth of a difference makes this 'Compact' 'hopeless' and from this insufficiency, neither of them can find liberation. The culmination proves to be even more disconsolating since both of them 'perish – tho' We reign'. The uniformity in the nature of their being precludes them from transposing their condition of existence, which again appears to be threatened by a situation of stalemate. Metaphor, here, rather serves as an avenue, enabling a kind of circumvention of such a situation of impasse, than merely being a literary device of language.

Both love and poetry bring for Dickinson a calamitous end. Her love poems are seldom considered as objective demonstrations in relation to the form of traditional lyric poetry. In Dickinson, the correlation between God and the

'lover-bridegroom' becomes 'too persistent to be dismissed' and certainly involves associations of male involvement and female dis-eases. Albert J. Gelpi cogently asserts that 'love was for her an experience which had something to do with man and something to do with God The association of the amatory and, in a loose sense, the mystical – as God becomes lover-bridegroom or lover manifests preternatural or deific qualities – is too persistent to be dismissed' [17]. Such an experience finds expression in the following poem:

Struck was I, not yet by Lightning –
Lightning – lets away
Power to perceive His Process
With Vitality.

....

Most – I love the Cause that slew Me.
Often as I die
It's beloved Recognition
Holds a Sun on Me – [18]

Initially mutilated by an unusual assailant, Dickinson comes out from this ordeal being enthusiastic for more scars. She asserts having undergone such tribulations as could be compared with a mortal assault and eventual death. It is as if she redeems her 'Power to perceive His Process', and then takes delight in the reiteration of her death. Though she feels numbed by being deprived of a lover who 'Holds a Sun' on her, Dickinson seems defaced in his companionship. As he withdraws from her, his dominance dwindles and she identifies in his retreat the moment of her regeneration.

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Citation: Mousumi Guha Banerjee (2021). '... this Moment Knew – / Love Marine and Love Terrene – / Love Celestial Too –': The Amorous 'Female Subject' and the Curious Love Intrigue in Emily Dickinson's Verse. *South Asian Res J Art Lang Lit*, 3(1), 7-12.