



Emily Dickinson's Poetic Feelings Through the Corridors of Death and Immortality

Yugal Jyoti Borah¹

Research Scholar(English)Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya

Dr. Deepa Phukan Boruah²

Retired Associate Professor and Head(English),

H.P.B. Girls' College, Golaghat, Assam

Abstract:

Emily Dickinson, one of the famous poets in American Literature, used to write a number of poems based on Death and immortality. Her socio-cultural background as well as her personal experiences compelled her to write death poems. She had to bear the death of her parents, friends and lovers untimely. She felt lonely and lived a secluded life without meeting her near and dears. Her limited communication with the society made her insightful and her perspective on life and death were reflected throughout her poetry. Emily's poetry has also been labeled as enigmatic. Her dilemma on Christianity, especially in relation with survival of the soul after death has been clearly reflected in her poems like "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" and "I Heard a Fly Buzz- when I Died" where her religious doubt has been widely explored. No doubt, Emily Dickinson agrees with some of the Calvinist religious beliefs, but still has some doubts about the natural wantonness of mankind and the concept of the afterlife.

Dickinson's spiritual background is signified by her religious beliefs which formed the basis of her obsession with death. Although Dickinson is a religious person who believes in the certainty of death and eternal life, she is an eccentric as she is doubtful and inquisitive about the nature of death. Dickinson's Transcendentalist attitude can also be identified to be a factor of her preoccupation with death as reflected in her poems.

Keywords: Life, death, Seclusion, Christianity, Afterlife, Emily Dickenson.

1. Introduction:

Emily Dickinson is one of the America's greatest and most influential poets of all time. Emily used to shut herself out of her society and spent her time to write the work in her private room. However, she was regarded as a genius women who can capture the deep philosophy in few short work. Only a few poems were published during her lifetime, the most of her poetic creation were published posthumously. Emily was born in Amherst, Massachusetts on December 10, 1830. Her family has deep roots in New England. The paternal grandfather, Samuel Dickinson, was known as founder of Amherst College. His father worked at Amherst and served as a state legislator. Dickinson entered an exclusive private school, Amherst Academy, and studied a Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, now called Mount Holyoke College.

Chronologically Emily Dickinson belongs to the 19th century but in their style and form, her poems have close affinities with the 20th century. ‘She has affinity with Emerson and the transcendentalists, with the hymns of the New England churches, specially the hymns of Isaac Watt, with the metaphysical poets in her turns of wit and her elliptical metaphors.

Dickinson used to write thousands of letters to her friends on various subjects matters. Dickinson used to express her feelings in the form of letters from her age 11 to mid 20s. Usually she sent the letters to her brother, Austin, or to friends of her own sex, especially Abiah Root, Jane Humphrey, and Susan Gilbert. The letters carried magnificent communications overflow with humor, urban myth, invention, and with reflection of dark and grave color. The loss of friends either death or cooling interest became a basic pattern of Dickinson’s letters. Indeed, much of her writing, both poetic and epistolary, seems asserted on a feeling of renounce and harmonized with deny, overcome, or a sense of solitude insight. Describing as ‘letters to the world’ Dickinson expressed the story of her secluded life, the background of her poetic world and some other personal matters in her letters. She composed poems on various subject matters like love, nature, divinity and ideas of human life. But she was majorly preoccupied with the themes of death, immortality, grief and solitude. Her desire to live a secluded life is very desperately expressed in her short poem ‘The Soul Selects Her Own Society’(303). Dickinson has also examined the grief she faced in the poem ‘I measure every Grief I meet’. She personifies death as a ‘suitor’, a civil companion leading her to immortality in her notable poem ‘Because I could not stop Death’.

In her early life Emily Dickinson was influenced by Leonard Humphrey, principal of Amherst Academy. Dickinson’s closest friendships usually had a literary vibes. She was for the first time introduced to the poetical world of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the leader of transcendentalist, by one of her father’s law students, Benjamin F. Newton, and to that of Elizabeth Barrett Browning by Susan Gilbert and Henry Vaughan Emmons, a gifted college student. Emily Dickinson was deeply influenced by two of Barrett Browning’s works, “*A Vision of Poets*,” and *Aurora Leigh*, on the progression of a female poet. These two works gave her a chance to stimulate her poetic ambition gathering knowledge about the great poets. Though she also corresponded with Josiah G. Holland, a popular writer of the time, he counted for less with her than his appealing wife, Elizabeth, a lifelong friend and the recipient of many affectionate letters.

In 1874 Dickinson’s father passed away suffering from a stroke. The following year her mother also became bedridden with paralysis. Dickinson and her younger sister Livinia nursed their mother. Consuming all such grief and obstacles Dickinson had written over 1400 hundred poems. In 1883 her mother also died. Unfortunately her nine year old lovely nephew Gilbert passed away forever suffering from typhoid fever. Death of Otis Phillips, Dickinson’s late life lover following a period long ill health, carried unbearable news for her.

Emily Dickinson became lonely and bitterly secluded having lost her loved ones one by one. Yet her creative world was not collapsed. She continued writing poems living in utmost seclusion in the Homestead. On June14, 1884 Dickinson felt ill. According to medical diagnosis she suffered from an attack of ‘Bright Disease’ a kind of kidney disorder, but hypertension was more likely to have been the primary cause. On May15, 1886 Emily Dickinson breathed her last at around six 0’ Clock due to kidney disease called nephritis.

In this study we try to discuss Emily Dickinson’s Poetic Feelings through the Corridors of Death and Immortality with a few major reasons of Dickinson’s preoccupation on Death and Immortality.

2. Objectives:

The following objectives have been set for the present paper.

1. To give a brief idea about the life of Emily Dickinson.
2. To give an idea of Emily Dickinson’s feelings on death and immortality.
3. To focus on the reasons for what Emily wrote poem on death and immortality.

3. Methodology:

The present study is descriptive in nature. The study is based on secondary data collected from various books, journals and publications and internet.

4. Discussion:

4.1. Emily Dickinson's poetic feelings on Death and Immortality:

Most of the poems written by Emily Dickinson were based on death, and immortality, love, nature and social problems she experienced around her. Embracing the vibes of Transcendentalism Emily Dickinson used to search for the universal truth about human life, immortality, God, faith and place of human being in universe. She is one of those poets not only in American Literature, but in the world literature who has composed as many as 500 poems with the theme of death and immortality. In these poems she tries to focus death from philosophical point of view. Sometimes death carries extraordinary fascination and mystery for her, which signifies not only despair and terror but also rest and peace.

Dickinson's religious depth and insight into the spiritual reality of God, the soul, immortality and eternity partly came from her elders in her childhood. As a young woman, she heard religious sermons from various preachers. So she had a vast knowledge of religion. It appealed to her, but she did not accept as it was. She had her own ideas about religion. She did not accept the ideas of her father about religion. Her mind grasped truth in moments of sudden intuition. The Creator and what He created fascinated her. She was a metaphysician. She criticized God but at the same time she felt that she was at His mercy. She was not a practical person. She loved and created poetry:

"It's easy to invent a Life -
God does it every Day -
Creation - but the
Of His Authority -"¹

Dickinson was attracted to Transcendentalism of Ralf Waldo Emerson who was one of the leaders of this movement. This philosophy created a belief in the essential unity of creation, the goodness of humanity, and the supremacy of insight over logic and reason. These new ideas led her to realize a lot more about life and it's ultimate destiny. The concepts of life and death turned into an obsession with Emily Dickinson which led her to spent time worrying about it as her life slowly went by instead of enjoying life and living it to its fullest. In this context we may quote a few lines one of her famous poem on death

"Because I could not Stop for Death"(712) where she renders a highly unusual personification of death. However, Death is described as a cordial and polite man throughout the poem, in sharp contrast with the traditional "grim reaper" bit.

"Because I could not stop for Death
He kindly stopped for me-
The Carriage held but just Ourselves-
And Immortality"²

4.2. Reasons for what Emily Dickinson wrote death poems:

Emily Dickinson wrote death poems influenced by lot of reasons. It included her personal experiences with death, her religious faith, and the historical events of her time. She has written the poems of death on some of her most intimate persons like friends and family members including her parents, who died in a very short period of time. During the 1880s

Dickinson had to bear the loss of several close friends – Charles Wadsworth, Judge Otis P. Lord, and Helen Hunt Jackson—and family members, including Gib and her mother. It should be noted that the early death of Sophia Holland, the close friend of Emily Dickinson, in 1844 was an unbearable loss for her that made her melancholic and disgusted to life. Because of these repeated traumatic experiences of watching dead persons Emily Dickinson lost her psychological equilibrium. She almost edged on ill health when she pictured her own death. This is mentioned in a letter to Jane Humphrey dated about April 1852:

“... The other day I tried to think how I should look with my eyes shut, and a little white gown on and a snow-drop on my breast, and I fancied I heard the neighbors stealing in so softly to look down in my face-so fast asleep - so still - oh Jennie, will you and I really become like this? Don't mind what I say, Darling, I'm a naughty, bad girl to say sad things, and make you cry, but I think of the grave very often, and how much it has got of mine, and whether I can ever stop it from carrying off what I love; that makes me sometimes speak of it when I don't intend...”³

The illness and isolated life of Emily Dickinson can also be identified as a major reason of writing death poems. Dickinson suffered from various illnesses like Bright Disease or Nephritis, Nervous Prostration etc. throughout her life. Such disease made her depressed and took a secluded life and it may have increased her tendency of death.

One of the reasons of Dickinson's passion for death was her isolation from the society. Dickinson did not live in a normal social setting communicating with people or friend, rather she lived alone most of her life. Her method of communication was by writing letters to some selected people. Thus she developed a great interest in reading and writing isolating from society. The other factor that could have influenced Dickinson's isolation from the society is her mother's ailing health that compelled her to secluded life at home. Thus her isolated life made her obsessed with death, which was considered as a mysterious aspect of life that nobody understood. Instead of fearing death like most of the members of the society, Dickinson was fascinated to speculate the positive side of it. Her obsession is divulged by the way that she personified death in her writings where she presents its human aspects such as tolerance and respect. In the poem “Because I Could Not Stop for Death,”(712) Dickinson says:

“We slowly drove-He knew no Haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For his civility-”⁴

Dickinson's obsession with spirituality and beliefs on religious doctrines can also be partly regarded as an important factor of writing death poems. The religious environment of her family focused her attention on death and immortality. The town she lived had also a Puritan tradition. The people used to read Bible in their homes. Though Emily Dickinson was repelled by Calvinism's serious doctrines and spent her life as a rebel, yet she never escaped its emphasis. She remained preoccupied with death, rebirth, immortality and reality of God. She attempted to examine her sense of dilemma on death and immortality through her poetry, which often focuses the relationship between death and faith, and the uncertainty of what lies beyond.

Moreover, some of the religious ideas were incompatible with the scientific ideas. For example, according to religious teachings human beings were created by God, while the Darwinism theory explained that human beings existed through evolution. Although Dickinson was not a religious person, she was receptive to the biblical teachings of life, death and eternity. In her young age, she attended religious services accompanied with her family where she was taught about the biblical teachings. Her obsession with death was brought about by the inquisitiveness to establish whether the biblical perception about life and death were true. In the poem “I Heard a Fly Buzz when I died”(465). Dickinson indicates that:

“And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last onset-When King –
Be Witnessed in the Room”⁵

Here, the “King” is referred to Jesus Christ based on Dickinson’s Christianity religious background. The bible indicates that human being exists in eternal life as souls where Jesus takes the upright souls to heaven.

Some other significant historical events for which Dickinson was strongly influenced to write death poems were the American Civil War in 1861, the abolition of slavery in 1865, the industrial revolution, and the expansion of the women’s suffrage movement etc. However, Dickinson was extremely hurt by human hatred and bloodshed and could not adjust herself with such a so much broken world. She wrote poetry to relieve her anxieties, gazing at death from all sides, testing her vision within the context of her poems, hoping to get close to death, hoping to cope with it artistically. She had no motive to prove anything; she had no motive to establish or to present a reliable theory about death. Though she may have hoped that one day her poems might be widely read, she did not write them for this purpose. She used to write poem for herself, as a medium to release from emotional stress. It should be mentioned that the years between 1855 and 1865 was the most productive time for Emily’s poetic life. And naturally the negative impact of war directly or indirectly resulted on her poems.

After getting matured, Emily Dickinson changed her attitude towards death. She positively personifies Death as Grim Reaper because death doesn’t stop to wait, and nobody knows when and how death comes. In her famous poem “Because I could not stop for Death” Dickinson has very artistically revealed the tone of acceptance and surrender, acknowledging the inevitability of mortality: “Because I could not stop for Death” — /He kindly stopped for me —”(Line 1-2). The speaker’s inability to stop for Death is contrasted with the stillness of death itself: “The Dews drew quivering and chill”(Line-14). The poem also focuses on eternity and infinity through the lines: “We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain —/ We passed the Setting Sun —”(Line11-12), highlighting the boundless nature of mortality.

5. Conclusion:

Whatever the reasons may be hidden as responsible of writing poems on death and immortality, Emily Dickinson could draw deep interests from the modern writers like Hart Crane, Allen Tale, Elizabeth Bishop and others for the unique artistic way of expressing her poetic thought. To her later poems Emily Dickinson explores the concept of death as a matter of patient and respect, and a being that follows her through all the stages in her life. Dickinson’s attempt to understand death was the major endeavor of her life. It contributed to generate an increasing motivation to write about death and immortality in order to understand its truth. She tried to unveil what happened in the afterlife and used poetry to translate her deepest feelings and beliefs into authentic pieces of art. She was not afraid of death because she had never been completely sure of what exactly followed it. She no longer thinks of death as horrifying rather she accepts it a familiar life companion. In her opinion, dying is a normal process that occurs in one’s life.

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