EMILY DICKINSON AND THE WORLD OF NATURE

by

Wasia*

Research Scholar

Department of English

Central University of Kashmir

Email id: wasia.mushtaq@gmail.com

Abstract:

The literary world has witnessed the emergence of innumerable poets across ages and cultures. Emily Dickinson was a 19th century American woman poet whose poetry granted her immortality in spite of her unrecognized death as a poet. Her poetry became public only after her death. However, it today exists as an epitome of stylistic innovations, un conventionality and an individualistic style. Dickinson’s poetry is pluralistic with regard to the thematic concerns. She lived a life of isolation but her poetry is packed with intricate emotional, psychological, physical, symbolic and realist facets. An important feature of her poems is her relationship with the world of nature. She would spend most of her time pondering over the mysteries of nature. Therefore, her poems bear innumerable resonances of nature. The paper attempts at exploring the ways in which Dickinson saw nature and the way she related herself and the humanity at large with it.

PAPER:

Born on December 10, 1830, Emily Dickinson claimed herself to be a lonely girl for all her life. She spent all her life in Amherst except for the one-year schooling at Mt. Holyoke and few short trips that she took outside. In 1840’s, she attended the Amherst academy where she studied English classics, French, Latin and other subjects. Emily, as a person, was open to life, to the moment. She loved illusion, memory, and imagination but at the same time, she was a realist too. Though advanced in her thinking, she was very conservative in temperament (Chase, 104) and rather “backward in her manners” (Chase, 1971: 94). Emily felt this temperamental difference from others and her attitude to life began to take a turn in her twenties.

The poetry of Dickenson was discovered after her death. When found in her room, her poetry looked “impossible- a jumble of words on odds and ends of paper…” (Thackeray, 3). She was a private poet who wrote for herself only and occasionally enclosed her poems to the letters which she would send to her friends and others. She was a passionate poet captivated with the idea of putting down on paper whatever sudden impression or thought absorbed her attention. Her poems even at the very first sight appear very distinct. She broke the boundaries of conventions in many categories according to which poetry is assessed. Dickenson’s discourse is fairly complex. She created a textual discourse that integrated a variety of levels of language and expression. Her poems appear as homely, vicious, familial, romantic, proto-feminist, anti- feminist, formal and what not. Her poems are the scenarios in verse constructed around the
themes of love, death, nature and immortality. To her, each word was a dynamo of implications and associations (Thackerey, 10). Each word was a perfect piece of immortality, a bit of mysterious, terrifying power which offered omnipotence to her (Thackeray, 12-14). She loved to employ her imagination in a constant play with words and this sport frequently ended in the creation of a metaphor, a paradox and a riddle with an extreme density of meaning. As a poet, Dickinson was bestowed with an exceptional romantic sensibility. From the world which lay within her, was born the poetic soul that aimed at attaining sublime heights. Everything including the abstract was treated by her in her poetry. Recognized as the Nun of Amherst, Dickinson created a private world for herself and left behind a vast poetic legacy for all the readers to come.

Emily Dickinson was quite pluralistic as far as the thematic concerns in her poetry are concerned. She was a love poet, a Nature poet, a transcendental poet and a symbolic poet. Her poetry related to both the self and the society. However, owing to the introspective tendencies that she had, one finds, in her poetry, the voice coming from within. Hers was a voice which revealed her tale of seclusion, solitude, separation and keen observation. Dickinson was a recluse from a very early age as mentioned earlier also. Therefore, she had very few people that she could relate to. In this regard, nature came as a refuge to her. From the window of her room, lay bare the beauties of nature that she observed, cherished and wrote about. She shared a very deep and cardinal bond with the nature. That is why, it occurs as a recurrent theme in her poems. In fact, her poems are packed with the objects of nature which she used to convey both symbolic and literal meanings. Nature has always been a primary theme and point of concern for poets like Wordsworth, Emerson and many others. For those, who sought refuge in nature, every object had a life in it and everything possessed a living spirit. That is how nature was a mother, a teacher, an instructor and an everlasting companion. Same was true for Emily. In her world of solitude, where no trespassing was possible, nature managed to have a stay. It was a constant focus of her observation. She would spent most of her time noticing it and penning down the intricacies, the features and the ways in which things appealed her. Her garden was her nearest surrounding along with the huge grounds around her home. She had limited her outlook to it and something that she would, at some point in life, see outside her private domain.

She gave a space to nearly all the happenings and events that took place in the natural world ranging from the sunrise to the sunset, the change to one season to another, the birds, the flowers and whatever was a part of it. Nearly everything occupied her imagination from the mountain to a blade of grass. Frisbie Whicher opines that “the world of nature in more familiar aspects lay ready to her hand. She availed herself of it as soon as she began to write poems at all and continued to the end. "About one-fifth of her nature poetry may be classified as nature poetry” (251). Dickinson had found in nature a source of solace, peace and comfort and the spirit that pervaded it appealed to her throughout. In spite of the disapproval from others to roam in the woods, she would go out in early years and find herself in a blessed state of being. In this regard, she writes in a letter:

When much in the woods, as a little girl, I was told that the snake would bite me…I went along and met no one but angels, who were far shyer of
me than I could be of them, so I haven’t that confidence in fraud which many exercise.

(Quoted in Whicher: 251)

She cherished all aspects of the natural world including the wilderness. In fact, her poems act as the reservoirs of living and non-living natural entities. Birds, flowers, landscapes, all attracted her. She shared a special bond with the birds. Many of her poems reflect the keen sense of observation that she had. From the movements of creatures to the change of seasons, she blended everything reflecting a highly complex sense of thought. Her poems come alive with the ways she rendered her experiences. In a poem written on a Hummingbird, she makes the reader feel the sensations of sound, touch and sight as well. She discusses the colour, the movement and the sense impressions with an economically effective use of language. She describes it as:

\[
\begin{align*}
A \text{ route of Evanescence} \\
\text{With a revolving wheel} \\
A \text{ resonance of emerald,} \\
A \text{ rush of Cochineal} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(Whicher: 262)

Birds were her dearest companions. Many of her poems deal with birds and their symbolic resonances. Her poems are emblematic of the fact that she was a creative genius. The pictorial quality and the use of symbols is well marked in her poetry. In fact, the way she associates and unites the inner and the outer sphere is unsurpassable. Her interior was actually tied up with the exterior. She used varied elements of nature in order to describe the positions which are occupied by humans. Not only this, in many of her poems, Dickinson talked about the alarming qualities of nature also. It has been talked about as being “a haunted house”. She talks about it as being pervaded by a ghost which can be related to the real spirit that pervades nature. Even at times, she brings it out as completely incomprehensible saying that the more one approaches nature, the more complex it gets for comprehension. Nature sometimes appears as being exceptionally beautiful while at many other places it appears as haunting and a mystery. However, through her poetry, she tried to capture and channelize the quest that she possessed in order to understand the illusive natural world.

Emily took a turn from the conventional praise and appreciation of nature which was in vogue at that time. She brought into limelight the decaying and the corruptive powers which operated in the natural world. At times, nature appeared indifferent and terrified one with the terrors that it threw open. In a poem, she discusses the cruel treatment offered to a flower by the frost and the way it kills the happy flower. She says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Apparently with no surprise} \\
\text{To any happy flower} \\
\text{The frost beheads it at its play} \\
\text{In accidental power} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(Johnson: 667-668)
Another important poem deals with the horror of a snake, of its mysterious appearances and disappearances. She discusses nature as actively hostile saying. The sudden movements of the snake incite the fear of unknown and evil. She says:

\[
\begin{align*}
A \text{ narrow fellow in the grass} \\
\text{Occasionally rides} \\
\text{Without a tighter breathing} \\
\text{And zero at the bone}
\end{align*}
\]

(Appelbaum: 44)

In many of her poems, Emily has emphasized and discussed the mysterious operations carried out in nature.

Nature, however, fascinated her, in all its appearances and actions. It laid an overwhelming impact upon her soul and she would dwell upon the possibilities of embracing and understanding it. Every object of nature fascinated her and influenced her to the extent that it occupied a space in her poetry. She saw in nature living qualities. She would feel the rain being followed by a breeze that would tap the door like a visitor. She would see the wind being accompanied by storms and tempests shaking the human world. She says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{An awful tempest mashed the air} \\
\text{The clouds were gaunt and few} \\
\text{A black, as of a spectre's cloak} \\
\text{Hid heaven and earth from view}
\end{align*}
\]

(Johnson: 93-94)

She talks about the wind as:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{....working like a hand} \\
\text{Whose fingers comb the sky} \\
\text{Then quiver down with tufts of tune} \\
\text{Permitted gods and me}
\end{align*}
\]

(Johnson: 691)

Dickinson, therefore, didn’t stick to one theory or one particular treatment of nature. Her outlook kept changing. She invited change after change. While at some places, nature was a gentlest mother, at many other places, it appeared elusive and bewildering.
In addition to these facets, Dickinson saw nature as a manifestation of the Supreme also. To her, nature and its objects weren’t just something to be observed but in addition to this, they served for her as a means to reach the Transcendent. Dickinson was a complex poet and many a times, she is regarded as a Nature mystic. Nature was something which acted as a symbol of the larger Self to her. It was eternity that every object of nature was packed with. A divine spirit pervaded all, quite the way as Blake saw things. He also believed eternity to exist in “a grain of sand”.

Although Blake’s poetry has a highly complex symbolism but a main feature of his poems was the presence of God in all things from minor to major ones. In the same way, Dickinson also saw through nature a more powerful spirit which pervaded the universe. The mystery of nature, the processes of nature fascinated her to the extent that she would try to comprehend the hidden messages that lay embedded in the natural activities. She says:

\[
\text{The only news I know} \\
\text{Is bulletins all day} \\
\text{From immortality……} \\
\text{The only one I meet} \\
\text{Is God}
\]

(Johnson: 401)

To her, the best way to approach God was to understand His creation. She didn’t believe in any conventional practices and therefore, would dwell upon the mysteries of nature, seek messages from them and share her burden of existence with them. She related every facet of nature with a heavenly quality. In a poem, she says:

\[
\text{.........................} \\
\text{The rapture of a finished day-} \\
\text{Returning to the west-} \\
\text{All these-remind us of the place} \\
\text{That Men call “paradise”……}
\]

(Johnson: 280)

For her, every aspect of nature had a divine orientation. Truth, to her, was nature and she could see and feel in the beauty of it, the presence of God. Richard Chase mentions with regard to Dickinson’s attitude as:

Emily Dickinson presented man, Nature and God as radically distinct. She doesn’t share the forms of nineteenth century naturalism which attempts to reconcile the claims of human nature with the claims of cosmic nature… nature is both reality and symbol, both house and ghost…we cannot know nature by getting close to it, because the closer we get to nature, the closer we get to unconscious and death

(Quoted in Tandon and Trivedi: 147-148)
Although Dickinson remained unattended and unknown during her lifetime but today she exists as one of the most complex poets in the literary world. Be it in relation to the thoughts, the themes, the language, the style or diction that she used to render her verses, Dickinson emerges unsurpassable in all regards. The complexity that her verses are embedded with demand more intellectual efforts in understanding her. The more one understands her poems, the more complex they get with regard to the thoughts and themes. She defies all labels and boundaries and exists as a unique voice of individuality.

**Bibliography:**


**Biographical details:**

- Currently working as a PhD scholar in the Department of English, Central University of Kashmir.
- Completed MA in English in the year 2012 from University of Kashmir.
- Qualified NET in the year 2012

**Address for correspondence:**

Wasia
Azad colony 90 feet road Soura Srinagar
Jammu and Kashmir
Pin code- 190011
Email id: wasia.mushtaq@gmail.com
Phone number: 9858300866