



Contextualising Dickinson's non-heteronormativity in Verse: A Portrayal of otherness

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Abstract— *The study aims to place in critical perspective Dickinson's non-heteronormative stance, adopted in selected love-poems – To Own a Susan, Title Divine is Mine, Her Breast is fit for Pearls, among others. Her cloistered life dictated by 19th century New England's restrictive culture, together with self-imposed isolation from contemporary society, segregated her considerably. Denying the institution of marriage and consummation, she defies domination by custodians of hegemonic masculinity: such is her unambiguous proclamation of resisting docile divinity, that reduces women to positions of choiceless-ness, material and emotional subjugation. Dickinson's letters reveal an 'otherness,' antithetical to age-old conceptions of Victorian Femininity. She refused to be contained by phallogentric norms, countering the 'Angel in the Hearth' stereotype and surpassing compulsory heterosexuality. These possibly never appealed to her psyche, sometimes revealing an extraordinary love for death – ushering in her existentialist crisis. Dickinson's homoeroticism, being a crucial route to navigate a personality as multidimensional, anticipates 20th century Lesbian Existence. While critics examine her feminism, her erotic voice isn't ignorable. Her impassioned, often controversial, partnership with Sue proves a direct subversion of archetypal choices invariably expected of women. The study shall probe into Dickinson's experience and portrayal of lesbian identity within the politics of heterosexual culture. Dickinson's "God" bears close proximity to a patriarch, who may not be violently dominant, but may reckon and revive narratives with the male-female binary unperturbed. The paper explores her treatment of 'human body' as a metaphor of transcendence from essentialist notions of heterosexual relations, while enquiring into circumstances behind the emergence of alternative gender ideologies and evolving survival strategies in staunchly patriarchal societies.*

Keywords— *marriage, otherness, homoeroticism, femininity, transcendence.*

The study aims to place in critical perspective Dickinson's non-heteronormative stance, adopted in selected love-poems. Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), born to Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross Dickinson, ushered, during eighteenth century's transitional turn, a new poetry: radical and often esoteric, and markedly bold in terms of its unambiguously non-heteronormative predilections and overtly homoerotic implications, which, as nuanced articulations, mirror the psyche of a private poet who was scripting, within the four walls of her sequestered existence, a revolt against the preventive culture of

nineteenth-century New England. Dickinson's poetry, marked by its experimental metrical patterns and unique usage of punctuations, heralds a silent but spirited mutiny against the normative sexuality as well as the stereotypical image of the 'Angel in the Hearth' imposed on women, defying the institution of marriage and consummation as well as the domination of hegemonic masculinity. It explores issues that lay bare the problematics of her existentialist predicament, while bringing under strong focus her homoeroticism, the crucial key that unlocks her multidimensional personality. The 'lesbian existence,' as

defined by Adrienne Rich, reveals the problematics of female existence:

[W]hat I call ... 'lesbian existence' is potentially liberating for all women. ... women will remain dependent upon the chance or luck of particular relationships and will have no collective power to determine the meaning and place of sexuality in their lives. (Rich 659)

Through the interpretation of a few poems, much of which evinces the boldness of homoerotic passion, often scrutinized for their numerous references to specific women who came in her life down the years, I aspire to map Dickinson's non-heteronormative approach to love, a movement that she was silently nurturing, tinged with a non-conforming spirituality. Academic circles have lately recognized that her only constant relationship was with the woman she consistently wrote about or to: Susan Gilbert, her sister-in-law. Faderman insists that Dickinson would not have understood her feelings to be sexual and suggests that any self-consciousness in the homoerotic poetry appears "not because she formulated it specifically as lesbian, but because it revealed so much of her." Martha Nell Smith argues for labelling the Dickinson-Gilbert relationship as lesbian based on her view that Dickinson's love for Susan was an "emotional devotion of a lifetime", "a carnal as well as an emotional affection." Ellen and Martha's collection of "letter poems," entitled *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson*, presents overwhelming evidence that Susan was indeed "the very core of the poet's emotional and creative life," overshadowing any elusive male figure. However, while Dickinson abhorred the very thought of assuming the role of a wife, she often participated in the submissive role allotted to her as the woman. But then again, she resented and sought to alter the role that, in effect, silenced her voice, her authority, her precious selfhood. Her poetry, too, consistently seeks to sabotage, invert, and destroy the very notions it readily establishes.

"Tell Her – the page I never wrote," unmistakably a poem of love, comprises multiple lines inherently queer. The admission that she 'left the Verb and the Pronoun out' seemingly hints at her failure to lend a verbal expression pertinent to her feelings. The pronoun would possibly be "she" or "her" and the verb – "love" or even "lust." Dickinson's confusion is understandable when viewed against the context of her era in which amorous attachment between two women was simply unimaginable. We also see, in "Her breast is fit for pearls" – pearls, thrones or crowns are all tokens of material wealth, with which the

man woos his mistress, and hence things Dickinson's persona has absolutely no intention to be in possession of. "Her breast is fit for pearls, but I was not a Diver..." (Emily Dickinson, "Her Breast is Fit for Pearls," 1-2), is how she denies the woman such mementos of insincere feelings. The permanence of the nest is possible because Dickinson does not yield to material pleasures of courtly love, but promises to be there for her beloved – an eternal, infinite promise from a woman to another. With social prohibitions denying legitimacy to the relationship, she keeps retiring, time and again, to the woman's heart: her "perennial nest." The declaration, "her heart is fit for home" tells us metaphorically or literally, that she feels at home with the woman so close to her, or wishes she could live with her forever in the invisible abode of love.

Saying "To know her an intemperance / As innocent as June" (Emily Dickinson, "To See her is a Picture," 3-4) – "intemperance," defined as indulgence, is associated with innocence: a contradiction that makes sense when seen against the zeitgeist of Dickinson's time, an era when sexual relationship between women was unthinkable. The dearth of restraint and intemperance on her part would devastate her, and even her most passionate display of physical affection for her beloved would appear merely a very intimate friendship, even to her. By admiring the woman from afar, she would be reining her immoderate thoughts, thus ensuring peaceful cohabitation of innocence and intemperance. But only if she were a man, they would be united in blissful matrimony and life would be a lilting lyric.

"What mystery pervades a well!" – a poem about nature, expresses her wonder at its immense mystery. However, in earlier drafts, "nature" was replaced with "Susan." "To own a Susan" is to possess. In its insinuated possession of Susan, the poem seems to resemble Wordsworth's Lucy poem, "Three Years she Grew" – where Nature owns Lucy and moulds her with affection. Dickinson too is mulling over possessing Susan as her own, though a fine line differentiates between 'owe' and 'own' – often interchangeable terms in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. The lesbianist overtone is unmistakable, but if one is unaware of the poet's identity or of the womanly sensibilities involved, they might interpret them as a male lover's thought, thus hinting at an otherness in her sexual tendencies, inducing questions of androgyny, transvestitism, and the transgender. Socio-political connotations of illegitimacy are invoked with the term "forfeit" in "Whatever realm I forfeit, Lord," in which the poet claims that God should not deprive her of this possession even when she has digressed from the path of rightness. She is ready to sacrifice her all to attain the bliss of owning "a Susan of her own," in her entirety, even at

the cost of defying God, or forfeiting her right to the Realm of Heaven or Morality. Delving deeper, "realm" has imperialist and colonial connotations, exemplifying another striking contradiction characterising Dickinson's poetry. The absolutist or hegemonic or patriarchal possession that she denies a man is exactly what she solicits for herself. In a candid and prayer-like urgency of appeal, she wishes to woo, win, and be betrothed to Sue, even if the man-woman union is what "the Lord intended."

The idea of possession continues, with a deep mystery embedded in how the author feels to be "Born – Bridalled – Shrouded – / In a Day" (Emily Dickinson, "Title Divine is Mine," 10-11). The selection of verbs indicates passivity. Initially, the poet seems a woman with a heavenly title, "Empress of Calvary": a "Title divine" conferred by God and granted through marriage, because she is a "Wife" and was "Bridalled" and has a "Husband" or at least someone standing for a husband. To hold onto the reigns of a horse, or to control its 'bridle' finds a parallel with the concept of being 'bridalled': inclusive of all puns. If a conventional way of life exists, she would rather prove herself otherwise, i.e., unique. Since Jesus died at Calvary on the Cross under a sign naming him "King of the Jews," we seem to assume she has become, as nuns do, the bride of Christ, resembling Lord Krishna's devotees who considered themselves wives of the Lord. Death cannot happen, as one desires it. Anticipating T.S. Eliot's "Birth, and copulation, and death", 'bridalled' is likened to 'copulation,' due to its obvious sexual connotations. The bride does not bear any visible vestige to affirm her marital status like the ring. "Swooning," traditionally considered a feminine bearing, characterises a dainty, little woman, further enhancing her tenderness. This is where the poet asserts her difference as a woman without the swoon. Alternately, the poem seems to be a proclamation of love between the woman and her man. Although Dickinson is unable to marry, she hints at believing in a spiritual and heavenly union which is as exciting as an earthly one, though it comes at a steep cost. She had to be crucified in some way as part of the deal. She has suffered for this love, this non-marriage. As she ends by asking "Is this - the way?" following her expression of her inability to say "My Husband," an exquisitely sad note is added to the three concluding lines. According to Suzanne Juhasz, Dickinson's poetry is:

[A] manifesto about her own ambition ... [a] curious combination of authority and girlishness which so often defines the Dickinson persona ... bravado and coyness, confidence and timidity. Likewise, we see poetic images of the cosmic, and, at the same time, of the everyday. (Juhasz 5)

Gilbert and Gubar identify the overt and covert texts of writing in disguise: "In short, she uses her art both to express and to camouflage herself."

In "Wild nights - Wild nights!" the speaker visualizes herself as a boat at sea, suggesting her puniness against the elemental ocean of desire, transitioning thence into the overtly religious image of "rowing in Eden": a reunion with the joys of paradise. But even more momentous is the idea of 'mooring,' representing the innate human yearning for an abode of permanence. Shakespeare too was careful in choosing an image of a permanent anchor in someone's heart. As in Sonnet 116, it is said, "Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds" (Shakespeare, "Sonnet 116," 2-3). 'Chart and Compass' is a metaphysical conceit for the nineteenth-century expeditions and imperialism, however, is redundant, because the moor has been found, thus bringing about great satisfaction and complacency. The poem's energy surrounds longing for the beloved, characterized by religious fervor. As a sailor on a stormy sea, the poet, longing to share "wild nights" with an absent lover and searching for the harbour of her love, might also be articulating a desire to be closer to God, a sheltering home, a "port" carrying a sense of homecoming or simply the desire for intimacy with another woman, wishing desperately to be resting in the "port" of her love, an overtly sexual innuendo. The poem ultimately portrays passionate love as paradoxical: divine yet earthly, perilous yet safe. Another unambiguous articulation of her private feelings is the poem, "Father, I bring thee not myself." Though treated as a stigma by her family, her relationship with Gilbert nothing base or improper, rather deific and far above the repressive mundaneness of the heteronormative. With self-oriented concerns replaced by thoughts and feelings for another person, Dickinson realizes that a love which makes an individual transcend egotistic limits can never be ignoble or squalid.

Dickinson's expression of the frailness and fragility of the feminine existence is the focus of "A solemn thing it was I said," its initial line strongly resembling section nine of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Isobel's Child.' A woman is an exclusive entity: an unblemished being possessing an impenetrable enigma, yet deep inside, she's conscious of her vulnerability. In love, Dickinson attains eternity and discovers new dimensions to her otherwise quotidian existence, which exposes one of the contradictions that dogged her lifelong: though she firmly refused to subscribe to the conventional woman image keen to love and marry, she most eagerly sought love throughout her life. Another dichotomy in Dickinson is revealed as she celebrates her diminution as a 'timid thing,' but glorifies herself as a

heroic figure, a 'woman white' who can 'sneer' at the so-called wisdom of Sages.

"There came a day at Summer's full" – with its beginning reminiscent of God's proclamation, 'Behold, I make all things new' (Revelation 21:5), and 'the marriage supper of the Lamb' (Revelation 19:9), the poem apparently breathes full-hearted faith and religiosity, but employs the Revelation as a metaphor for an undogmatic and non-religious love. Aware of Dickinson's rejection of institution-based piety, we ultimately realise that Dickinson is speaking about the radically different choice she has made in love, which will culminate in "that New Marriage" to be brought about by two lovers as they help each other to their respective Crucifixions. It is Dickinson's way of celebrating her unconventional love which can never have its fulfilment in this heteronormative world.

Dickinson's quest for permanence, surfacing in poems that reiterate the need for shelter and belonging, comes in the wake of non-responsive conditions. The yearning for a benign lord who would not hesitate to forgive forfeitures matches the urge for introspective searches into the psyche. With sexual intimacies or physical proximities sometimes being directly related to the friendships she experienced, her unabashed avowal of "otherness" continued to threaten traditional orientations. Anticipating the late-twentieth-century Sapphic poems, dominating Women's Writings, Dickinson was already dictating basic premises of the norm. We may recall, what Charlotte Perkins' protagonist says in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, "I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal – having to be so sly about it or else meet with heavy opposition." (Gilman 648) Women writers faced multiple hindrances, back in the days. Despite being groomed in patriarchal philosophies, Dickinson dared to question the veracity of the phallogocentric order, but her real triumph is that, in her exploration of numerous possibilities of femininity and sexuality in a radical attempt at redefining identity: she's a Victorian lady presenting her poetry with alternate concepts of heteronormativity, quasi-religiosity, while reflecting a deliberate engagement in imperfection and disruption, involving a certain politics of identity.

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