

## Aspects of Ecofeminism in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

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### Abstract

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830-1886) is widely considered as one of the leading American poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and one of the finest exponents of nature whose poetry commanded brilliance of style and integrity of vision. Writing as a woman in an ever-growing patriarchal society, Dickinson laid out the framework for many young women to express their thoughts and feelings in a new discourse and broke social conventions with her unique poetry and writing, speaking out on women's role and feminist aspects. She lived an introverted and isolated life which gives her poetry a certain uniqueness and allows the reader to find deeper meanings with her use of poetic devices, specific word choices, and eloquent writing style. As a keen observer, Dickinson wrote about what she knew and what intrigued her to probe into universal themes such as the wonders of nature, death and immortality, dreariness of everyday life, love, and the search for self. Her poems which numbers around eighteen hundred have attracted critics from all over to analyze and interpret them through various perspectives. Based on earlier studies which explored her leanings towards feminism, psychology, phenomenology and nature, this paper aims to analyze the ecological perspective in Dickinson's selected poems through the lens of ecofeminism.

**Keywords:** Emily Dickinson, nature, poetry, ecofeminism

Ecofeminism, coined by the French feminist Francois d' Eaubonne in 1974 represents the union of feminism and ecological movements which believe that there is a direct link between the oppression of women and the denigration of nature, and that the liberation of women and nature cannot be separated. It examines the connection between women and nature and asserts that all forms of oppression are connected and that structures of oppression must be addressed in their totality and uses the basic feminist tenets of equality between genders, a world view that respects organic processes, holistic connections, and collaboration. As Rosemary Ruether states in *New Woman/New Earth*, "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. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the

ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this [modern industrial] society” (204).

Ecofeminists argue against anthropocentrism and androcentrism and criticize the male-centric values by stating that both the exploitations of nature and women arises out of the same reason, that is, the masculinist and patriarchal drive for dominance. Ecofeminist criticism dwell on the argument that this exploitative dominance arises from hierarchical thinking that characterizes patriarchy and justifies the process of subordination. Ecofeminist activist and scholar Greta Gaard states that the main premise of ecofeminism “is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature” (1). There are multiple perspectives within ecofeminism that attempt to explain the shift from a worldview of reverence for women and nature, of all life being interconnected, to a conceptualization of women and nature as subordinate objects. One of the lenses of ecofeminism observes how western culture describe the world in terms of “self- other” based on value dualism and false dichotomies such as man/woman, man/nature, white/nonwhite, human/animal, civilized/wild, and reason/emotion. Gaard explains that “domination is built on such dualisms because the other is negated in the process of defining a powerful self and the privileged self is always the male leading to the creation of value hierarchies” (5).

Environmental philosopher and ecofeminist, Val Plumwood validates this view by stating that the way men are often perceived as being superior to woman is interrelated with the way civilization is often seen as superior to the wild. In general, humans view themselves as superior to the natural environment, making patriarchy the “villain behind the ecological crisis” (11). For ecofeminists like Plumwood, the women/nature connection does not by definition have to result in mutual oppression for women and nature as observed by some (non-eco) feminists who emphatically reject the idea of unity of the feminine and the natural, believing that connecting nature with femininity is always “regressive and insulting” (20). However, Plumwood calls for an ecological feminism where “women consciously position themselves with nature” (21) while positing that there can be real, positive value in women reclaiming their unity with the natural world. The ultimate goal of ecofeminism, therefore, is to eradicate the patriarchal structures which are responsible for the degradation of both women and nature, so as to create a harmonious world that recognizes the importance and interdependence of all beings. This idea can form the basis of an ecofeminist analysis of Emily Dickinson’s selected poems that portray her deep connection with nature.

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830-1886) is widely considered as one of the leading American poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and one of the finest exponents of nature whose poetry commanded brilliance of style and integrity of vision. Writing as a woman in an ever-growing patriarchal society, Dickinson laid out the framework for many young women to express their thoughts and feelings in a new discourse and broke social conventions with her unique poetry and writing, speaking out on women’s role and feminist aspects. She lived an introverted and isolated life which gives her poetry a certain uniqueness and allows the reader to find deeper meanings with her use of poetic devices, specific word choices, and eloquent writing style. As a keen observer, Dickinson wrote about what she knew and what intrigued her to probe into

universal themes such as the wonders of nature, death and immortality, dreariness of everyday life, love, and the search for self.

Emily Dickinson lived in a time when women were expected to play a very different role from that which is experienced today. Women above a certain class were expected to have their place at home, acting as wife, mother, hostess and decorative ornament. They were not often expected or allowed to voice their opinion or independent view on things - especially in areas of perceived male expertise such as politics, economics, career or social issues and only a few women were educated just enough to be suitable companions to their husbands at society events and these women obviously did have lively minds and questioned things they saw, such as injustice. They were denied a voice, however, and in poems such as "I'm Nobody, Who Are You?", Dickinson may have been trying to make a point about the voiceless in society, including women and nature:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you – Nobody –too?  
Then there's a pair of us!  
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!  
How public – like a Frog –  
To tell one's name – the livelong June –  
To an admiring Bog! (260)

Emily Dickinson is one of the finest exponents of nature in the field of American poetry. She observes nature closely in its rich diversity and shows a rare understanding of the relationship between man and nature in her poems. However, she does not indulge in the false glorification of nature in any way and tries to resolve the mystery of Nature. Dickinson wrote more than five hundred poems about nature and a great deal of her nature poems are found to be sentimental and unaesthetic. Yet, the beauty and magic of the pre-industrial landscape captured in her poems makes her a distinguished nature poet who is unquestionably original. She loves nature, gets close to nature, and becomes friends with flowers, trees, birds and insects as depicted in her nature poems.

Dickinson's poems display harmony between man and nature and all lives in nature, thus showing her awe and respect for nature. Nature to her is a dependable companion as suggested by the speaker in her poem, "Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church." The speaker of this poem stays at home with nature while others go to church because he/she feels at home in the lap of nature but feels suffocated in the vicinity of the church:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –  
I keep it, staying at Home –  
With a Bobolink for a Chorister –  
And an Orchard, for a Dome –

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice –  
I, just wear my Wings –  
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,  
Our little Sexton – sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman –  
And the sermon is never long,  
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –  
I'm going, all along. (324)

In this poem, bird, orchard, and nature replace chorister, church and God. Heaven, to her is an ongoing process of living on earth and not a place to be hereafter. Similarly, the speaker in the poem, "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed" indulges in natural intoxication:

I taste a liquor never brewed –  
From Tankards scooped in Pearl –  
Not all the Frankfort Berries  
Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of air – am I –  
And Debauchee of Dew –  
Reeling – thro' endless summer days –  
From inns of molten Blue –

When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee  
Out of the Foxglove's door –  
When Butterflies – renounce their "drams" –  
I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats –  
And Saints – to windows run –  
To see the little Tippler  
Leaning against the – Sun! (214)

This poem clearly suggests that the poet finds ecstasy in nature and enjoys intimacy with the meadows and sky, flowers and butterflies, and all things in nature.

Dickinson was born into Calvinism and educated in Puritanical dogma, however, from the times she attended Amherst Academy and wrote lovingly of the flora and fauna of the Pioneer Valley, she seems always to have been more of a worshipper of Nature. As a woman and a worshipper of nature, Dickinson's feminist consciousness and ecological insight finds expression in her poetry. In the poem, "Nature, the Gentlest Mother" Dickinson feminizes nature as a

“gentle mother” to reveal the interconnectedness of all lives that begin and end with women and nature while establishing a common position of women and nature:

Nature – the Gentlest Mother is,  
 Impatient of no Child –  
 The feeblest – or the waywardest –  
 Her Admonition mild – (790)

Nature is like a gentle mother who is “impatient of no child.” From the ecological point of view, this poem symbolizes how “Mother Earth” patiently takes care of all forms of life even as the modern men find ways to destroy her wellbeing.

In Dickinson’s poem, “Nature is What We See”, one can sense her deep love and appreciation of nature. The theme of the poem is nature’s simplicity, yet this poem suggests that nature is anything but simple, it is mysterious, magnificent, and inexpressible. The surface meaning primarily suggests that nature is natural and simple, but if we explore the underlying meaning, we see how Dickinson uses various patterns to describe the diversity of nature:

“Nature” is what we see –  
 The Hill – the Afternoon –  
 Squirrel – Eclipse – the Bumble bee –  
 Nay – Nature is Heaven –  
 The Bobolink – the sea –

Thunder – the Cricket –  
 Nay – Nature is Harmony –  
 Nature is what we know –  
 Yet have no art to say –  
 So important our Wisdom is  
 To her Simplicity. (668)

Dickinson’s choice of the objects in this poem is not arbitrary but carefully chosen which reflect nature’s diversity because they share certain characteristics and exemplify a pattern that exists in nature. The focus on the diversity of nature suggests Dickinson’s close understanding of ecology and the interconnectedness of everything else, because “Ecology as a discipline means, fundamentally, the study of the environment in its interanimating relationships, its change and conservation, with humanity recognized as a part of the planetary ecosystem. It is a study of interrelationship, place, and function, with its bedrock the recognition of the distinction between things-in-themselves and things-for-us and the recognition of the difference between things-in-themselves and things-for-us, and the corollary of us-as-things-for-others leads directly into feminisms, particularly in their interrogation of gender. Only by recognizing the existence of the ‘other’ as a self-existent entity can we begin to comprehend a gender heterarchical continuum in which difference exists without binary opposition and hierarchical valorization” (Murphy, 4). In “Toward an Ecological Feminism and a Feminist Ecology,” Ynestra King states that “A healthy, balanced ecosystem, including human and nonhuman inhabitants, must maintain diversity” (119)

and Dickinson's poem reflects a healthy and balanced ecosystem where all creatures live in "Harmony."

Dickinson tries to understand herself, Nature, and God through her appraisal of what she sees, hears, and feels in nature and in doing so, she interconnects her transcendentalist belief and ecological consciousness. An ecofeminist analysis of her poems suggests similarities between women and the diverse images of nature which remain ignored. Ecofeminism as a branch of ecocriticism, "explicitly intertwines the terrains of female/male and nature/humanity, which have been artificially separated by philosophical linearity for far too long" (Murphy, 7). While expressing her desire that human beings should strive for equality and harmony among all living entities, Dickinson challenged patriarchal institutions and ideologies which degraded the existence of women and devastated nature. She not only indulges in controversial issues related to religion, nature, and society, but also argues the issues of gender roles determined by the prevailing cultural norms of patriarchy. Dickinson's affinity with nature, as well as her defiance against religious beliefs and social tradition in her poems establishes her ecofeminist perspective and provide ample scope for further appreciation and analysis of her nature poetry.

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