

Love in the poetry of Emily Dickinson

Sonam

Research Scholar, Singhanian University, Rajasthan, India

Abstract

Emily's love poems presents a spiritual concept of love and, though some poems in which personal experiences are transformed into celestial ecstasy, could be explained in temporal terms as well, yet a general survey of the cluster of love poems would reveal that her concept of love is basically spiritual and divine. The poems that best exemplify her spiritual attitude toward love are woven around the ritual of wedding. Her love poems transcend human world to the divine one where the soul merges with the supreme in eternal bonds.

Keywords: emily's, spiritual

Introduction

Love seems to be one of Emily Dickinson's favorite themes and no less than a hundred poems were written by her on this subject. She felt and understood love in its myriad moods and forms, and in her poetry she tried to perceive this great, rather the greatest motive force of the universe in its varied aspects from different angles. To her "Love is that one perfect labor naught can supersede" (Letters, 484) and "To be loved is heaven" (Letters, 487). Love makes us "Heavenly without our trying in the least" (Letters, 601). She sings of human and divine love are so intermingled in most of her lyrics that it becomes difficult to tell whether she is speaking of both at the same time or like Plato, trying to attain celestial love through the profane.

The intensity and passionate tone of their love lyrics led her biographers to find out the source of her love poetry. Various names have been suggested like that of Newton, her tutor and Wadsworth, a married man, In a letter to Higginson she writes, "When I state myself as representation of the verse, it does not mean me, but a supposed person" (Letters, 411). So it will be mere justifiable to regard both the lover and the beloved in her poems as poetic figures. Whether the source of inspiration for her love poetry was a human being or a divine beloved, Emily Dickinson sought God in her lover. In one of her poems she identifies love with God and says that both the lover and the beloved become immortal because love confers divinity upon them.

*Unable are the loved to die
 For love is immortality,
 Nay it is deity –
 Unable they that love – to die
 For love reforms vitality
 Into divinity*

(Poem No. 809).

The object of her poems is a divine rather than an earthy lover. Many of her poems appear to be lyrics addressed to a human being. But her poems do not describe the physical features of her lover, nor did she describe or anticipate the lover's response, as conventional poems like Shakespeare's sonnets do. Emily Dickinson, like Donne, could wade through

different experiences of love and tally earthly love with spiritual love. Ruth Miller says that "she has pictured herself as the bride, the woman in white, the wife of Jesus" (Miller, 80) with reference to a few of her poems. In some places however, the profane and the divine love merge into each other and meaning can be interpreted in both ways, but, as Charles Anderson says that Emily Dickinson's earthly love is just a symbol of heavenly love (Anderson, 176) [3]. Commenting on the transition from earthly love to celestial love, J.B. Pickard says, "The human lover remains shadow as her vision of the lovers, heavenly marriage changes to an actual celestial union with God". The love that she describes reflects that inner experience of the soul which has no earthly lover as its object. Emily (Pickard, 90) identifies love with "Deity" and "Divinity" (Poem 809). The imperceptible divine quality of love is expressed in terms of perceptible phenomena in poem 673.

*The love a life can show below
 Is but a filament, I know,
 Of that diviner thing.*

*That faints upon the face of Noon –
 That smiles the Tinder in the Sun –
 And hinders Gabriel's Wing - ...* (Poem 673)

The thinness of filament by contrast suggests the vastness of divinity that real love has. The divinity of love is first seen as light. The "NOON" is only a faint reflection of the light of love that "Smiles the Tinder in the Sun". Love, as she imagines it, divested of all its earthly voluptuousness, becomes a mystic life force. Anything less than an affair with God would not have satisfied her spiritual longings. So she says:

*I could suffice for him, I know –
 He- could suffice for me –
 Yet Hesitating Fractions – Both
 Surveyed infinity –* (Poem 643)

None of earthly lovers can replace the "Him" and "He" of the poem. Love that is glorified in such terms as in the following poem transcends the earthly love of ordinary mortals:

*You left me – sire – Two Legacies –
A Legacy of Love.
A Heavenly Father would suffice
Had he the offer of –*

*You left me Boundaries of Pain –
Capacious as the Sea –
Between Eternity and Time –
Your Consciousness – and M-*

Love breathes spiritual and heavenly atmosphere and even the pain used by it makes the lovers taste the very bond of eternity, and is as infinite as the sea. Such an ecstasy of love and its concomitant pain cannot be said to belong to earthly life. Her songs of love, therefore, heighten love to the love of eternity. Again in poem 817 she considers herself to be the bride of trinity and believes that her marriage will “Celestial Host” shall “Conquer Mortality”. She often sought of Lord Christ as her divine lover and some of her bridal poems celebrate her marriage to the savior. In poem 279 she expresses her wish to go with her divine lover if she marries her

*Tie the Strings to my life, my Lord
Then, I am ready to go!
Just a look at the Horses –
Rapid! That will do!*

*Put me in on the finest side –
So I shall never fail –
For me must ride to the Judgment –
And it's party, down Hill –*

*But never I mind the steepest –
And never I mind the sea –
Held fast in Everlasting Race –
By my own Choice, and the –*

*Goodby to the life I used to live –
And the world I used to know –
And kiss the Hills for me , Just once –
Then – I am ready to go !* (Poem 279)

The poet decides to be with her lover (My Lord) “in everlasting Race” and to bid Goodbye to the life I used to live”. The poet waits as a blissful, blushing maid for Omnipresence to come and claim her as His bride.

*I am ashamed – I hide –
What right have I – to be a Bride –
So late a Dowerless Girl –
Now here to hide my dazzled face –
No one to teach me that new Grace –
Nor introduce – My Soul –
.....
Raiment instead – of Pompadour
For me – My Soul – to wear –
.....
Fashion My spirit quaint – white
.....
Baptized – this day – A Bride –* (Poem 422)

The marriage that she is thinking of is not an ordinary earthly

marriage. In order to be the bride of Christ, she has to achieve the purity and perfection which she lacks. She wonders how she should adorn herself with trinkets or “Fabrics” of cashmere” to cover her imperfections and finally emerges confident, ready for marriage, hoping to be “ Baptized – this day – A Bride always thought of divine marriage as love’s baptism or a seemed baptism. Emil Emily Dickinson often thought of Lord Christ as her divine lover and some of her bridal poems celebrate her marriage to the Saviour. In Christian tradition the nuns are known as the brides-of-the-Lamb and there was nothing new or original when she thought of herself as the bride of Christ. In one of her poems she referred to herself as a Nun.

*Madonna dim, to whom all Feet may Come.
Regard a Nun.*

In Hindu tradition, the highest form of worship for a woman is to consider the Lord as her husband, “Pati”. This attitude was made famous by the Indian saint-poet, Mira Bai, who always sang of Lord Krishna as her husband. Legend ascribes this attitude of Mira Bai to a biographical incident. It is said that Mira Bai, when only a child of ten, had gone to attend a marriage along with her father. After seeing the bridegroom, she innocently asked her father as to who her bridegroom was. The embarrassed father replied, after considerable hesitation, that her bridegroom was the Lord-Lord Krishna. From that day, the legend goes, she deemed herself to be the bride of the Lord and sang and danced with complete self-surrender and abandon. Even when she was married to the Rana of Udaipur, she refused to give up her devotion to Lord Krishna and refused to accept anybody else as her husband. The angry Rana sent her a poisoned cup of drink but the poison had no effect on her. She has celebrated this miraculous incident in one of her devotional songs.

*The Rana sent the poisoned cup
But the living Mira danced to the Lord.* (Poem 918)

Even in the absence of this legend, Mira Bai’s devotion would have been perfectly understood, as it was in, accordance with the Hindu tradition. In reading Emily Dickinson’s bridal poems, the Indian reader is constantly reminded of Mira Bai. In some of the bridal poems, Emily Dickinson thought of the entire ceremony of marriage in purely temporal terms.

*A Wife-at Daybreak I shall be-
Sunrise-Hast thou a Flag for me?
At Midnight, I am but a Maid,
How short it takes to make it Bride-
Then-Midnight, I have passed from thee
Into the East, and Victory-*

*Midnight-Good Night! I hear them caill,
The Angels bustle in the Hall-
Softly my Future climbs the Stair,
I fumble at my Childhood's prayer
So soon to be a child no more-
Eternity, I'm coming-Sir,
Savior- I've seen the face-before'.* (Poem 461)

The expectation and excitement with which she speaks about her marriage are purely in earthly terms. She is still a maid at

midnight but with the morning she hopes to be married and will thus be a wife. She innocently asks if the morning has a flag to greet her in her elevated position as a wife, as she also hopes that with her journey in time towards the morning (East), she would achieve victory. She bids goodnight to the night as she hears the bustle of angels in the hall and as her future bridegroom or husband climbs the stairs to take her to the marriage ceremony. She responds to eternity and says that the face of the Saviour, her bridegroom, is familiar to her.

The midnight and the morning have more than literal connotations. The midnight refers to the period of her spiritual darkness of worldly existence and the morning represents her awakening from the midnight of temporal life and her transfer to the celestial life after death. Responding to the call when she says:

*Eternity, I'm coming-Sir,
Savior-I've seen the face-before*

She is obviously referring to the eternal life after death when, married to the Saviour, she will be merged with eternity. In view of her deeper meaning, she does not speak of her future bridegroom or husband climbing the stairs but keeps the abstract noun with its suggestiveness.

Softly my Future climbs the Stair.

The "Future" is thus both her future husband and future life after death which will bring about her union with the Saviour. Using conventional terminology borrowed from Roman Catholicism, she made the most explicit statement of her celestial marriage in another poem.

*Given in Mariage unto Thee
Oh thou Celestial Host-
Bride of the Father and the Son
Bride of the Holy Ghost*

*Other Betrothal, shall dissolve
Wedlock of Will decay-
Only the keeper of this Ring
Conquer Mortality.* (Poem 817)

It is such a marriage that is everlasting, whereas all earthly marriages, even of deliberate choice, must decay and dissolve with death. The celestial marriage conquers death and a person who has achieved such a marriage and is "the keeper of this Ring", will no longer be subject to spiritual mortality, even though physical death may come to her as to others.

The preceding discussion of some of the bridal poems shows Emily Dickinson's absolute dedication to Lord Christ and her surrender of the self to Him. She believed that divine love was the only source of all wisdom and it is through it that human life and its multifarious activities can become meaningful. It remains to be seen that she spoke of Jesus with the freedom and familiarity which her love for Him had bestowed upon her. Here again she reminds the Indian reader of the devotional songs of Mira Bai who always used the imagery of profane or earthly love in expressing divine love.

The discussion of her bridal poems shows Emily Dickinson's absolute dedication to Lord Christ and her surrender of the self to him. She believed that divine love was the only source of all

wisdom and it is through it that human life and its multifarious activities can become meaningful. Here she reminds the devotional songs of Mira Bai who always used the imagery of profane or earthly love in expressing divine love.

A companion poem which more inherently blends spiritual love and human passion, is "Title Divine – is mine" (Poem 1072). Here the ritual of an actual marriage outhunt the human bride groom is so fully developed that are can almost feel the human passion being transformed into divine love:

*Title divine – is mine!
The wife – without the Sign!
Acute Degree – Conferred on me –
Empress of Calvary !* (Poem 1072)

Thus, we see that Emily's love poems present spiritual concept of love. Her experiences of passion, love, devotion to her divine lover develop into a feeling of sacramental union with God. Prior to Emily Dickinson poets like Edward Taylor have celebrated spiritual union with God the as symbol of marriage. But they curtailed their emotions to conform to the puritan doctrine, whereas Emily Dickinson was more frank in the expression of her emotion as the bride of God. In this respect, she resembles Donne and Vaughan. For Donne addresses God as a lover does: "Take me, imprison me, for I / Exceptyou enthrall me, never shall be free, nor ever chaste expect you ravish me. (Bennet, 25) and Vaughan says that mysteries of God, the "Great Ring" are revealed only to his bride : "This Ring the Bride – Groom did for none provide / but for his bride"(Bennet,272)

In some poems of Emily Dickinson, love for man serves as a means to grasp Omnipresence, and has been transmuted into love of God. Here also she seems to follow Donne's example in utilizing human love as a step to divine love: "Here the admiring mind did whet / to seek thee God. So streams so show their head". (Bennet 14) Emily Dickinson realizes the image of God in all mortals and chooses that divine quality as her object of devotion: "of all the souls that stand create - / I have elected – One – "(Poem 664) Vision of the speck of divine love reveals to the poet that the earthly love is nothing but a "brief tragedy of flesh." In the poem "Because that you are going", Emily Dickinson, as a poet of divine love, expresses her faith in immortality because of the hope that her love will be seen in the other world.

References

1. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (ed.) the Letters of Emily Dickinson. III Cambridge Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 1958, 1(11).
2. Thomas H. Johnson (ed). The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson Cambridge Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955.
3. Ruth Miller, The Poetry of Emily Dickinson Middleton: Wesleyan 1988 Charles Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: The Stairway of Surprise New York: Halt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960.
4. J.B. Pickard, Emily Dickinson: An Introduction and Interpretation New York: Rinehart, 1967.
5. John Bonnet, Five Metaphysical Poets Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966.