

Feminist view in Emily Dickinson's selected poems

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Abstract - The study focuses on Emily Dickinson's poems that express feminist views and societal expectations toward women. The selected poems, "They Shut Me Up in Prose -" and "She Rose to His Requirement - drop", explore how Dickinson's poems connect to feminism and literature. In order to gain a deeper understanding of how literature can serve as a medium for social criticism and individual expression, the researchers used the qualitative archival and documents technique in this study. The result of this study shows feminist literary criticism and ecofeminism that Emily Dickinson used in her poetry. The researchers also find historical context and intersectionality in Dickinson's poems.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson; feminist literary criticism; gender role; social expectation

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature gives a deep study of society, culture, and personal experience because it is an expressive expression of human creativity. According to Abrams (2014), the term literature has been used as a signifier since the 18th century. Writings of fiction and imagination include poetry, prose, narratives, and drama. Poetry is one of the condensed and focused ways of expressing art that can condense complex emotions and ideas into a few well-chosen words. Well-selected words can create short and meaningful word chains that can convey the meaning, ideas and messages the writer wants to convey without having to use long word chains. The aesthetic value of poetry still exists even though it appears in the short form, and it is still keeping the idea and deep concern about human life.

Various problems arise in people's lives within society, and the feminist issue is one of them. According to Carter (1984, in Neimneh et al, 2020a/b) "Feminist poetry serves as a critical space where female voices can confront and subvert traditional gender roles, offering new insights into the lived experiences of women". Because of several social conditions that exist now, a lot of poetry is being written using discrimination experiences as an object, and additionally, many female poets used feminist topics in their works.

Emily Dickinson is one of the most famous poets in American literary history. Her writings had a huge impact on American literature, and has inspired the feminist activist in the 19th century feminist movement. Dickinson frequently explored the themes of identity, self-expression, and the tension between societal expectations and personal freedom. She also often addressed themes of confinement and liberation, reflecting the prevailing feminist currents in her time.

This study would analyze Emily Dickinson's poems that tell about the feminist values and critiques the prevailing societal expectations placed upon women. This demands women to perform in accordance with their traditional roles. The selected poems in this study are "*They Shut Me Up in Prose –*" (1935) and "*She Rose to His Requirement – drop*" (1955). The researchers are interested to discuss Emily Dickinson's poetry because her poems used a lot of innovative language, and creative imagery. Her poetry also has ecofeminism ideas, which is a characteristic element in her works (Hu, 2015).

The motivation for choosing this topic stems from a deep interest in exploring the intersection of literature and feminism through the works of Emily Dickinson. Dickinson's poetry offers a rich tapestry of themes and innovative language that challenge societal norms and provide profound insights into the human condition. By analyzing her works, we can gain a deeper understanding of how literature can serve as a vehicle for social critique and personal expression. Additionally, studying Dickinson's feminist perspectives allows for a broader examination of how environmental and gender issues are interwoven, reflecting the complex realities of both the past and present.

Emily Dickinson's poetry, specifically "*They Shut Me Up in Prose –*" and "*She Rose to His Requirement – drop*" offers a fertile ground for feminist literary analysis. Her work frequently addresses the limitations imposed on women by a patriarchal society, critiquing the societal norms and expectations that stifle women's voices and creativity. By examining these poems through the lenses of feminist literary criticism, ecofeminism, historical context, and intersectionality, we can gain a deeper understanding of Dickinson's contributions to feminist literature and thought.

Feminist literary criticism provides a framework for analyzing Dickinson's explorations of gender roles and societal expectations. Showalter (1985) emphasizes the importance of uncovering how literature perpetuates or subverts patriarchal ideologies. In "*They Shut Me Up in Prose –*" Dickinson critiques the gendered distinction between prose and poetry, where prose is seen as rational and masculine, and poetry as emotional and feminine. By highlighting the intellectual depth and creativity inherent in her poetry, Dickinson challenges the notion that women's literary contributions are less serious or valuable. Similarly, in "*She Rose to His Requirement – drop*" Dickinson explores the theme of women conforming to societal and marital expectations, depicting the sacrifices women make to fulfill their prescribed roles. This critique aligns with feminist examinations of how societal norms limit women's autonomy and potential.

Ecofeminism, which combines ecological concerns with feminist perspectives, offers another lens through which to analyze Dickinson's work. Buell (1995) suggests that ecofeminism highlights the connections between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women, advocating for a more holistic approach to social justice. According to Candraningrum (2013, in Wiyatmi et al., 2020) ecofeminism is based on the belief that society's patriarchal system is the cause of the oppression of nature and women, as both are viewed as "objects" that can be used for profit. Dickinson likes to use descriptions of nature to express her emotions. In her poems every element of nature has their own symbolic meaning. The imagery of a bird trapped in a cage in "*They Shut Me Up in Prose –*" can be interpreted through an eco-feminism lens, with the bird representing women whose natural freedom and potential are confined by societal norms. Similarly, "*She Rose to His Requirement – drop*" illustrates the loss of autonomy and connection to one's true self, symbolizing the domestication and control of women parallel to the taming of nature by patriarchal forces.

Historical context is crucial for understanding Dickinson's critique of the 19th-century societal norms. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) discuss how women writers of the 19th century often used their work to subtly critique the restrictions placed in them. "*They Shut Me Up in Prose –*" reflects the restrictive educational and social systems that confined women to specific roles, highlighting the broader societal tendency to limit women's intellectual pursuits. In "*She Rose to His Requirement – drop*" reflects societal expectations for women to conform to their roles as wives and mothers, enforced through cultural norms and legal restrictions.

Intersectionality, which considers the interplay of various social identities such as gender, race, and class, further enriches the analysis of Dickinson's poetry. Crenshaw (1989) introduced this concept to highlight the multidimensional nature of oppression and privilege. While Dickinson's primary focus is on gender, the themes in "*They Shut Me Up in Prose* –" can also be analyzed through an intersectional lens. The metaphor of confinement can apply to other marginalized groups who face similar restrictions, offering a broader critique of societal hierarchies. In "*She Rose to His Requirement – dropt*" the focus on gender roles can be expanded to consider how these roles intersect with other identities such as socioeconomic status, revealing the varied pressures and limitations experienced by women from different backgrounds.

II. METHOD

The method used in this study is a qualitative method. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2009; cf. Putri & Marlina, 2022), qualitative research employs interpretive and naturalistic approaches, which implies that researchers look into phenomena in their natural settings with the intention of making sense of or interpreting events in terms of the meanings that people give to them. By using a qualitative method, the researchers want to know about the feminist view in Emily Dickinson's two selected poems. Data collection techniques in qualitative research, according to Cresswell and Cresswell (2018, cf. Dewi, 2021), include four different kinds of strategies: qualitative observation, qualitative interviews, qualitative audio-visual material, and archival or documents. Researchers used archival of documents as a strategy in this study.

The techniques for collecting data are as follows: reading the poetry several times, and analyzing data based on related journals. Several previous studies and model analyses conducted by Mirza Noman Shamas. (2020), Ardoy & Mesa (2021), Sabahat Rafique (2022), Prameswari & Susilowati (2022), Guo (2023), Palomo-Domínguez et al (2023), Triandayani & Sulistyaningsih (2023), Fayaz Khan. (2023), Lestari & Alamsyah (2024), Wajdi (2018), Igbaria (2024), and Wajdi et al (2024a, 2024b, 2024c) have inspired and supplied some ideas in the analysis of the present research.

Selected Poems

a. *They Shut Me Up in Prose* – (445)

*They shut me up in Prose –
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet –
Because they liked me "still" –*

*Still! Could themselves have peeped –
And seen my Brain – go round –
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason – in the Pound –*

*Himself has but to will
And easy as a Star
Look down upon Captivity –
And laugh – No more have I –*

b. *She Rose to His Requirement - dropt* – (732)

*She rose to His Requirement – dropt
The Playthings of Her Life
To take the honorable Work
Of Woman, and of Wife –
If ought She missed in Her new Day,
Of Amplitude, or Awe –
Or first Prospective – Or the Gold
In using, wear away,*

*It lay unmentioned – as the Sea
Develop Pearl, and Weed,
But only to Himself – be known
The Fathoms they abide –*

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 They shut me up in Prose

Emily Dickinson's poem titled "*They shut me up in Prose*" highlights feminist values prominently in each stanza. Overall, this poem narrates the limited space for women to express themselves. Women often feel silenced and ignored, especially in the realms of literature and intellect, which are predominantly male-dominated. Therefore, this poem embodies feminist values that touch upon and emphasize the desire for freedom of expression and recognition of women's talents. Furthermore, at that time, there was a significant difference between poetry and prose. They were distinguished as separate entities, with prose considered a male privilege while poetry was viewed as more feminine. This is evidenced by research I found in an article by Dr. Oliver Tearle (Loughborough University) stated that "Poetry, by contrast, is concerned with emotion rather than intellect, and is seen as a more flighty and fanciful pursuit. In such a restrictive binary, poetry is more 'feminine' than prose, which is the mode used for rational and 'weighty' subjects." Poetry is more open because poets can express themselves, whereas prose tends to be a form used by writers for serious matters. Therefore, Dickinson criticizes the separation between the two by bringing feminist values and critiquing the patriarchal dominance of that era.

*They shut me up in Prose –
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet –
Because they liked me "still" –*

If we delve deeper, in the first stanza, Dickinson describes a little girl trapped in a closet. This illustrates a highly patriarchal society because "*They*" in that stanza represents the patriarchal society that restricts women from creating and voicing their aspirations in the literary world. This patriarchal mindset assumes that women are not meant to be heard or seen. Women are taught to be silent and passive, to be quiet, obedient, polite, and beautiful. The phrase "*liked me 'still'*" underscores the preference for women to remain quiet and passive, fitting into the ideal of a docile and compliant female. By using the metaphor of a little girl put in a closet, Dickinson poignantly captures the enforced seclusion and suppression of female voices. This imagery reflects the broader societal tendency to confine women within narrow roles, limiting their potential and freedom.

The closet symbolizes the restricted space women were often relegated to, both literally and figuratively, in a male-dominated society. This initial stanza sets the tone for the poem's exploration of the oppressive forces that stifle women's expression and the yearning for liberation from these constraints. The poem's setting of a little girl being forced into a closet because of her stillness can also be interpreted as a critique of the educational and social systems that condition girls from a young age to conform to restrictive gender norms. This early indoctrination perpetuates the cycle of silence and passivity expected of women, reinforcing their secondary status in society. By highlighting this dynamic, Dickinson calls attention to the need for change in how girls and women are perceived and treated, advocating for a more equitable environment where their voices can be heard and valued.

*Still! Could themselves have peeped –
And seen my Brain – go round –
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason – in the Pound –*

In the second stanza, Dickinson compares herself to a bird trapped in a cage. The word "*Still*" in this poem conveys two meanings: physical stillness and mental activity. Although

physically confined, her thoughts and creativity remain free and limitless. Much like a bird, which by nature should fly freely in the vast sky but is instead caged and remains still. Dickinson finds it irrational to limit women's creativity by only allowing them to write poetry, especially for reasons rooted in social norms. This portrayal gives an ironic impression because it restricts someone's creativity and freedom. This stanza emphasizes the essence of freedom, specifically the freedom to create within the literary world. Dickinson's use of the bird metaphor not only illustrates the irrationality of confining women's intellectual and creative abilities but also highlights the broader societal implications of such restrictions. By likening herself to a bird, Dickinson evokes the image of a creature naturally designed for freedom and exploration, underscoring the inherent injustice of its confinement.

This powerful imagery serves to critique the societal norms that seek to control and limit women, denying them the space to express their full potential. The comparison to a bird accused of treason for attempting to escape its cage further emphasizes the absurdity of punishing women for seeking intellectual and creative liberation. Moreover, the phrase "*seen my Brain - go round*" emphasizes the dynamic and active nature of Dickinson's mind, which remains vibrant and full of ideas despite physical constraints. This vivid description challenges the stereotype of women as intellectually inferior or passive, asserting that their mental capabilities are as robust and vigorous as men's. The poem thus advocates for the recognition and appreciation of women's intellectual contributions, calling for an end to the societal practices that stifle their creative expression.

*Himself has but to will
And easy as a Star
Look down upon Captivity -
And laugh - No more have I -*

The end of this stanza shows that true freedom comes from one's will and determination, symbolized by a star that continues to shine without boundaries, just like a person's freedom that can essentially be unhindered depending on how strong their will and determination are. The last line of this stanza reveals that where there is a will, there is a way. Even with pressure from others and society, it will not limit or hold someone back from their determination. Emphasizing the theme of patriarchal dominance, the entire poem reflects the spirit of freedom, creativity, and resilience against oppression that contradicts societal norms, specifically patriarchy.

Dickinson's metaphor of a bird trapped in a cage is powerful in illustrating the suppression of women's voices and creativity. It highlights how society's expectations and norms act as cages, confining women to specific roles and limiting their potential. This metaphor resonates with the broader feminist movement, which seeks to break these societal cages and allow women to soar freely, expressing their thoughts, ideas, and creativity without restraint. Additionally, the imagery of the bird in the cage underscores the natural desire for freedom and the inherent injustice of confinement. Just as a bird is meant to fly and explore the skies, women, too, are meant to explore their intellectual and creative capacities.

By comparing herself to a caged bird, Dickinson poignantly criticizes the societal structures that inhibit women's full participation in intellectual and artistic domains. Moreover, the poem's insistence on mental freedom despite physical confinement reflects a core feminist principle: the power of the mind and spirit to transcend physical and societal limitations. This resilience and determination to maintain mental freedom are central to the feminist pursuit of equality and justice.

In essence, Dickinson's poem is a powerful critique of the patriarchal structures that silence and confine women. It calls for the recognition of women's intellectual and creative capabilities and advocates for a society where women can express themselves freely and fully. The poem's rich imagery and profound themes make it a timeless piece in the feminist literary canon, inspiring ongoing efforts to achieve gender equality and freedom of expression for all.

3.2 She Rose to His Requirements - dropt

Emily Dickinson's poem "*She Rose to His Requirements - dropt*" describes an internal life of women after marriage. Dickinson tried to show her awareness about the life or the status of women after they get married. Dickinson put herself as a marriage woman even though she was not married. In her biography, Dickinson resided during a specific era of historical revolution and there were eight instances of religious revival movements during that time. She and her family were influenced by strict Puritan rules. They did not dare to go against the rules that had been set by her father based on puritanism teachings. As a woman Emily Dickinson has a greater obligation to carry out the duty to fulfill their obligation by following instructions and refraining from engaging in prohibited actions without questioning or disputing.

Dickinson's poem "*She Rose to His Requirement - dropt*" is a compelling critique of the oppressive social expectations imposed on women during the 19th century, particularly on Puritan women, forcing them to make significant sacrifices within the rules of marriage. This paper found the feminist view in every stanza in "*She Rose to His Requirements - dropt*" poem. Dickinson shared her concerns about marriage, many responsibilities assigned to women in 19th century America, and their sacrifices, showing how a woman makes a pivotal choice to get married.

She rose to His Requirement – dropt
The Playthings of Her Life
To take the honorable Work
Of Woman, and of Wife –

The poem's first stanza shows the woman's transition performance on her role as a woman to married women or housewife. "*She rose to His Requirement*" the first line in the first stanza indicates that the woman is adjusting or improving herself to conform to the standards established by a man, likely her husband or a societal norm. The word "*rose*" implies a sense of effort or progression, as though completing these requirements were a feat or a required action she must perform. "*The Playthings of Her Life*" is a metaphor for the woman's personal interest, joys, and pursuits. Dickinson emphasizes how society might perceive these pursuits as unimportant or trivial in comparison to the "*honorable Work*" expected of her by using the term "*playthings*".

It is also referring to societal expectations of women's duties, particularly those deemed noble or respectable, such as household chores, caregiving, and supporting her husband. The repetition of "*of*" and the parallel structure serves to highlight the dual roles that women are expected to fulfill. By emphasizing "*Woman*" and "*Wife*", Dickinson critiques how women's identities are often defined and confined by these roles. Dickinson also draws attention to the difference between her former life of personal joy and her new life of duty and responsibility by placing the positions of "*Woman*" and "*Wife*" against the "*Playthings of Her Life*".

If ought She missed in Her new Day,
Of Amplitude, or Awe –
Or first Prospective – Or the Gold
In using, wear away,

Strong feelings of loss and yearning for the woman's previous life are conveyed in this stanza. The feeling of loss extends from missing certain activities and includes a deeper longing for the happiness and fulfillment that her former life offered, the life before a woman got married. Through this line, "*If ought She missed in Her new Day*", the description of that feeling becomes more intensified. The "*new Day*" represents a new stage in the woman's life, one that is marked by her responsibilities as a wife and a woman who complies with social norms. In addition to being a new beginning, it also comes with new obligations and it might have come at the expense of something precious from her previous life. Afterwards, the second line in this stanza, "*Of Amplitude, or Awe –*", shows what the woman has lost or lacked in her previous life.

Dickinson used strong imagery to visualize the richness of the woman's previous life and the depth of her longing. To show the richness of the woman's past life and the intensity of her

desire, Dickinson used the powerful images of "Amplitude" and "Awe". The word "Amplitude" depicts visions of expansive landscapes, open skies, and limitless potential, while "Awe" depicts instances of extreme beauty and deep emotional resonance.

"Or first Prospective – Or the Gold" is the third line in the second stanza. It continues on to explore what the woman could have missed or given up by taking the dual roles that society wanted of her, as a woman and a wife. Dickinson used the imagery of dreams and hopes in the term "first Prospective". This imagery conveys a sense of limitless potential as well as the excitement of looking forward to a happy life. The term "the Gold" represents something of great value, describes something of a sense of material abundance and financial security that might have been part of her ambitions. And her ambitions in the past were not just about material success but also about personal and emotional richness.

The line "In using, wear away," Dickinson used metaphor to explain that a woman's dreams will gradually disappear due to the relentless demands of society's expectations. These sacrifices are experienced by many women and most of them are not expressed and possibly unrecognized by society. Therefore, in this poem Dickinson criticizes the social norms and the emotional impact that women's sacrifices took.

*It lay unmentioned – as the Sea
Develop Pearl, and Weed,
But only to Himself – be known
The Fathoms they abide –*

The third stanza of Dickinson's poem "She Rose to His Requirements – dropt" clarify a profound sense of the unspoken depth and unacknowledged value of woman's inner life. Dickinson used simile, metaphor, and imagery to explain the meaning of the previous stanzas in more detail and to highlight the feminist viewpoints. Through the line "It lay unmentioned – as the Sea" we can see the simile usage in the line. By using the phrase "as the Sea" Dickinson compares the unmentioned aspects of the woman's life to the sea. This comparison suggests that just as the sea holds many hidden mysteries and treasures beneath its surface, the woman's inner life contains many unspoken and unacknowledged depths.

The words "Pearl" and "Weed" serve as metaphors to highlight the coexistence of both valuable and ordinary aspects of a woman's inner life. The word "Pearl" depicts the hidden beauty and value developed through struggle, while the word "Weed" depicts the unremarkable, day-to-day parts of a woman's life. The presence of "Weed" alongside "Pearl" emphasizes that not all aspects of her inner life are glamorous or precious. It highlights the reality that her life, like the sea, contains both beauty and mundanity, both precious elements and everyday struggles. For the last two lines, Dickinson also used the imagery to highlight the considerable depth of her experiences, emotions, and sacrifices.

The use of the word "Fathoms" emphasizes the sense of something vast and immeasurable. It suggests the woman's profound depths and valuable qualities remain hidden from the external world and known only to herself. Also, it is not easily perceived or understood by others, much like the depths of the sea.

Ultimately, Dickinson's poetry gently asks us to consider the women's actual value and impact society demands on women, encouraging better recognition of their inherent worth and the significant sacrifices they make. This makes people think about how different internal truths and external appearances of women might be, and it also makes them wonder if social roles actually honor women or if they only limit their happiness and actual potential.

IV. CONCLUSION

Emily Dickinson, one of the greatest American poets of the 19th century, inspired and influenced feminists significantly with her works. She stands out among contemporary poets for her creative imagery and distinctive poetic styles. In this study Emily Dickinson's poems "They Shut Me Up in Prose –" and "She Rose to His Requirements – dropt" provide a profound critique of the societal

norms that restrict women's freedom and creativity. Through feminist literary criticism, ecofeminism, historical context, and intersectionality, these poems can be understood as powerful statements against the patriarchal structures of Dickinson's time.

It also serves as a call to action, and to improve how society sees and recognizes women. Her works continue to inspire feminist thought and advocacy, highlighting the enduring relevance of her insight into gender and society. By analyzing these poems, we gain a deeper understanding of Dickinson's feminist perspectives. Furthermore, Dickinson's use of innovative language and symbolism adds layers of meaning to her critique, allowing readers to explore the complexities of women's roles and experiences. Her depiction of the struggles and sacrifices faced by women in a male-dominated society resonates with contemporary feminist issues, making her work timeless and universally applicable.

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