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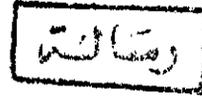
**THE ALIEN VISION IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY  
A STUDY IN THEME AND TECHNIQUE**

**BY**

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**Thesis**

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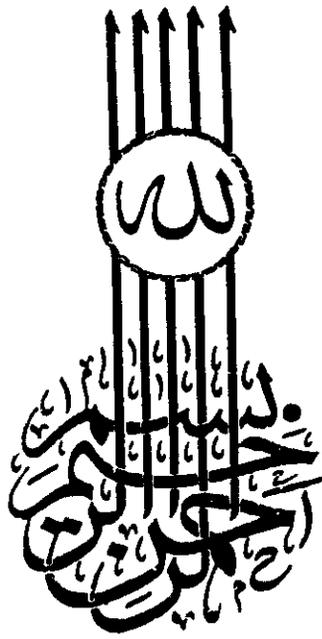
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# **PREFACE**

## PREFACE

The purpose of this thesis is twofold: it is designed to shed light on two main aspects of Emily Dickinson's writings: the subject-matters she chooses and the techniques she uses. Her private life, however, is as important as the above-mentioned aspects. Her hidden life has greatly affected her way of writing as well as of thinking. Moreover, it can clarify the puzzling nature of her odd subject-matters and the alien aspects of her technique.

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, December two, 1830 and died in the same place after fifty five years. She did not obtain any literary recognition during her lifetime. Her poetic gifts remained hidden in her great works since no publication was in her life. Her parents died without knowing that their daughter would be one of the most famous poets in American literature.

She lived in a small remote town called Amherst, which was far from the urban centres of New York and Boston. In summer, it is hot and green whereas in winter, it is bleak and as quiet as a cemetery. It is so cold that its inhabitants prefer to stay indoors beside the fire.

The Dickinsons were a distinguished family, being among

the first families in New England. They had their own duties towards public causes, always working for the sake of the common good. Samuel Fowler Dickinson, Emily's grandfather, was always among the persons responsible for the establishment of Amherst college. He was a religious man and a strong defender of the faith. He took a lot of interest in his town and his people, sparing no expense that was useful for the welfare of his country. Edward Dickinson was Emily's father and Samuel's oldest child. Like his father, he became a lawyer. He followed his father's footsteps in promoting the common good. However, he became aware of the fact that he had better not forget his own economic security for that of the public. Later on, he got married to a lady called Emily Norcross. She was passive and submissive. She had two daughters "Emily" and "Lavinia". The family lived in their own house on Main Street.

Emily Dickinson preferred to live as a recluse. She decided to stay at home for so many years without passing out the door. She spent years and years away from the world and abstained from visiting others. Yet, she was not the first to do so. Other writers turned out to be perfect stoics, becoming indifferent to the pleasure or pain of the outer life. They preferred to live in loneliness. Yet, each one had his own motive that drove him to lead a secluded life.

For example, Thoreau had acquired the theme of loneliness from Emerson. He carried it with him until 1862. He lived in loneliness for two years of his own will. He built a small house near Warden Pond where he used to prepare his own food and bake his own bread. Speaking about loneliness he says:

I am no more lonely than a single,  
mullein or a dandelion in a pasture,  
or a beanleaf, or sorrel, or a house-fly,  
or a bumble bee. I am no more lonely,  
than the Mill Brook, or a weathercock,  
or the North Star or the sound wind, or an,  
April shower, or a January Thaw, or the,  
First spider in a new house.<sup>1</sup>

One can easily conceive that Thoreau tried to emulate Emerson in living in isolation, but he failed. Wasting his time and almost losing his identity, he did not feel alienated from the outer world at all. At thirty seven, he said, ".... It is with infinite yearning and aspiration that I seek solitude, more and more resolved and strong; but with a certain genial weakness that I seek society ever".<sup>2</sup> Thoreau was not able to reach the final stage of the experience. He was never solitary enough. He was constantly worrying about the outer world. Throughout his poems, one can see that he was always writing about the economic problems, the bad education in schools and universities and the political crises that always threaten mankind. In brief, Thoreau tried hard to follow Emerson but he failed. He could not detach himself completely from the outer life because society

invaded him.

Even the theme of loneliness is quite prevalent in the writing of some writers. Hamlet, the great Shakespearean character, was in search of a special life. He asked God to confine him in a nutshell than to live in a world of murder, deception and malice. To him, this little world would be his own kingdom. He said: "Oh, God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams".<sup>3</sup>

After Thoreau's death, exactly in 1862, Dickinson had undertaken what Thoreau had dropped. She became a new devotee of the technique of loneliness. Her motives, however, for living in isolation were different from Emerson's and Thoreau's. Many were the reasons for this:

- a frustrated love affair.
- to preserve her energy to have time to write.
- a stratagem to dramatize a drab existence
- to ponder a "metaphysical quandary".
- to protect her vulnerability to overstimulation
- a special protest against the hardness of the outer life to avoid conformity.
- to control and regulate her personal relationships.
- her complete dependence on others.
- the bad side of the father upon her.

- the inability to develop herself towards the opposite sex.
- to face a less dreadful fate.

Emily Dickinson retreated to the confines of the Dickinson house and detached herself completely from the outer world. She seemed strange and indecipherable in the eyes of her neighbours. She surrounded herself with an atmosphere of eccentricity. She used to go out to avoid meeting people. She always went to the church early to avoid going after all the people had gone there. Also, she used to run when the door bell rang and to dress herself in white. Thus, she was happy to retreat indoors for the last fifteen years. After her father's death many visitors came to her house. Strangely enough, she did not meet anyone except one of her dearest friends, Samuel Bowles. When he died she did not go to his funeral. Rather a music band played in front of her house while she was listening out of sight. She would not see her brother's wife, Sue, who lived next door. Once, she said, "every time he (a negro servant) presents himself, I run".<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the doctor had to prescribe medicine from a look at her in full clothes. When colonel Higginson met her eight years after from her first letter to him, he was astonished by her strangeness. He did not believe that her life and art reflected a normal personality. He considered her "partially cracked".<sup>5</sup> Emily felt what occurred to him. She said, "I never see strangers and hardly know what I say".<sup>6</sup> Higginson expressed his astonishment saying " I am

glad not to live near her ".<sup>7</sup> It means that he was shocked by her brilliance and swiftness of thought or she had a strange character which made it difficult to establish a strong relationship with her. All in all, he found her indirect, evasive and defensive. He realized that any attempt to ask her about herself would make her withdraw into her shell.

Emily Dickinson was in search of love. She dreamed of it and sang of it in her poems. She wrote "Affection is like bread".<sup>8</sup> It means that love nourishes the soul in the same way bread does the body. Love as well as bread is essential to the human being. Thus, a baby needs two basic things love and nourishment. On the one hand, if the mother gives her baby little food, he or she, will not survive for a long. On the other hand, he or she will live a bleak life because there is no love. He will find life unbearable and boring. Emily suffered from the same loss of maternal love. Her life with her mother was not ideal but rather a routine life. She once said, "I never had a mother".<sup>9</sup> She was in urgent need of her mother's affection. In her letters, she gave a full portrait of her mother's personality. She described her as emotionally shallow, timid, self-centred, ineffectual, conventional and submissive. Thus, she practised a great formative pressure upon her daughter. Emily found it difficult to establish an intimate relationship with her

mother. Moreover, she felt how bitter it was to lack the maternal love at home. Regarding this matter Emily Dickinson wrote to her cousins who cared for her in Cambridge city at the time of her eye treatments: you have so often fed me".<sup>10</sup> She wrote also to a friend of hers " Do you find plenty of food at home ?, famine is unpleasant".<sup>11</sup>

Emily Norcross was not the type of a mother to be admired. She was not competent to be a model for her daughters. She was only able to bring up shaky and troubled sons and daughters. As a result, Emily Dickinson felt shocked, troubled, fearful and uncertain. She preferred to live in isolation because she was not ready to experience the loss of love again from those around her. Thus, Emily Dickinson had to do two important things: to find a suitable mother who would give her love and affection; and to find a suitable model upon which to pattern her development. If she was not able to find the two women, she would completely lose her outer life. In fact, she retreated to her cell lest she should lose everything: what is outer and what is inner.

On the one hand, Emily felt her mother's short comings. She said: "Mother does not care for thought (as I do), her faculties are unobtrusive".<sup>12</sup> She felt that she was superior to her: "My abilities .... are neither few nor small".<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, she admired the characters of

so many writers such as Charlotte and Emily Bronte, Elizabeth Browning, George Sand and George Eliot. They represented the type of woman she deeply wanted to be, the type she wanted to have as a guide, preceptor and friend. They symbolized the kind of assertive, lively, effective, talented, ardent woman she wanted her mother to be. Moreover, her father's inability to accept and respect his wife led to Emily's inability to take her mother as a role model. Thus, there was no way but isolation. It is worth mentioning here that Emily was obliged to go to her aunt Lavinia during her mother's illness. There, she lived happily. She did not miss her mother. Aunt Lavinia wrote to Emily's mother: "she (Emily Dickinson) is very affectionate and we all love her very much - she does not appear at all as she does at home. She does not make but very little trouble .... she is so happy here".<sup>14</sup> This means that she was unaffectionate, troublesome, demanding and unhappy at home as a result of the lack of maternal love. No doubt, a love-starved child can not live anywhere but in isolation.

Edward Dickinson was Emily's father. He was over ambitious. He was concerned with many political affairs. He was completely serious: he never had any fun. Also, he was always busy. He had no time to spend with his children. Nevertheless, Emily never missed him. His presence was not pleasant. On the contrary, it increased the tension on the

part of the children. They felt relieved when he was out. In addition, he had strong control over the house. A submissive wife enabled him to do what he liked. He was obtrusive and obstinate to the extent that he did not give his children the chance to grow , to think and to be themselves. He always interfered in their personal affairs. Once he asked Lavinia to read a letter loudly in front of him no matter who the addressee was. This uncommon behavior created an unbearable, dreadful feeling and a gloomy familial atmosphere, and, to be sure, isolation was the way out.

Edward Dickinson managed to persuade his wife and his children that he was the only protector against the vices and calamities of the world. Thus, Emily was afraid to leave the house. She locked herself in her room in fear of an intruder's breaking in. When a dog bit Vinnie's thumb, Emily wrote Austin: "This was when father was gone , and of course it frightened us more".<sup>15</sup> In fact, the father's part in the life of his daughter was deep and dangerous. He made her anxious and able to confront the outer world face to face.

In spite of the bad effects of her father upon her, she loved his personality tenderly. She took him as the center of her affection. This resulted entirely from two main reasons: she found her mother an unsuitable model to pattern herself upon (the idea of the submissive mother) and she