

Dickinsonian Cynical View of Marriage in 'I'm "Wife" - I've Finished That-'

Arunava Roy

English Hons. (1st Class 2nd), University of Kalyani
 English M. A (1st Class), Rabindra Bharati University
 UGC NET Qualified, Berhampore, Murshidabad, West Bengal, India
 Email: [subhoavo\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:subhoavo[at]gmail.com)

Abstract: *Emily Dickinson, one of the most prolific American poets, through her brilliant use of slant rhyme, unconventional capitalization, punctuation as well as obscure short lines portrays an extremely complicated approach regarding marriage in the poem "I'm "wife"—I've finished that—". The poem is written from a female perspective. According to the pre - conceived notion of the patriarchal society, a girl becomes a full woman after she has gone - through a legal marriage procedure. Dickinson in an underlying sarcastic tone mocks this traditionalism. The woman's identity is compartmentalized into two distinct stages - wifehood and girlhood, seen from the 'safety' and 'comfort' of wifely identity, girlhood is depicted as a state of 'soft eclipse'. How potently does the phrase 'soft eclipse' communicate that cushioned banality she envisages in marriage! Dickinson finishes the poem in an optimistic manner stating that marriage should not be compared because she is a "wife" and her thoughts should stop there. Her anti - marriage view is crystalized in subtle image "stop there"! suggesting the termination of a woman's independence in marriage. Dickinson through her simplistic languages mocks the traditional society by going against the complete woman concept. Dickinson is a playing feminist. Through her curious sense of impish humor and slippery semantics, she satirizes the patriarchal society.*

Keywords: Girlhood, self - identity, banality, eclipse, patriarchal authoritarian voice

Emily Dickinson, one of the most prolific American poets, through her brilliant use of slant rhyme, unconventional capitalization, punctuation as well as obscure short lines portrays an extremely complicated approach regarding marriage in the poem "I'm "wife"—I've finished that—". The poem is written from a female perspective. Some critics have interpreted this as a wry anti - marriage poem extremely unusual in a day when marriage was extolled as the highest good. In the very first line of the poem, the poetic voice is trying to reassure herself that she is married, she has left her girlhood behind and has become a complete woman [complete woman concept]. According to the preconceived notion of the patriarchal society, a girl becomes a full woman after she has gone - through a legal marriage procedure. Dickinson in an underlying sarcastic tone mocks this traditionalism. The repetition of the word 'that' indicates that the wife struggles to find a word that accurately describes her previous physical state. The anadiplosis of 'that' serves to emphasize the speaker's waning memory of her former state of being. In line three "I'm Czar" illustrates a contrasting idea—what a woman can never be but a man can in this male - biased society—that is demonstrated with the sharp puncturing dashes. The word Czar is commonly associated with the men. In one line "I'm Czar—I'm "Woman" now—", Dickinson subtly reveals the rapture in sovereignty between the word "Czar" and 'wife', one is syntactically independent while the other is syntactically dependant and socially subordinated to another. Wife and woman are emphasized because they appear in quotation marks; Czar is not. Wife and woman are terms the speaker feels can be used in place of her name, but she determines her identifications with Czar to be more metaphorical. The role of a Czar is exceptionally prescribed: Czar is an eastern monarch, the sceptre of supreme imperialist, dictatorship, and tyranny. The speaker seeks to convey that she sees herself as exceptionally esteemed and powerful. The last line of the first stanza is completely

contradictory. The poet believes that it is much 'safer' and more comfortable to be a typical wife lacking self - identity but labelled as the possession of her husband. Dickinson ridicules the cultural norms of 19th century society for imposing the stereotypical views on girls pressurizing them to be married.

**'How odd the Girl's life looks
 Behind this soft Eclipse—
 I think that Earth feels so—
 To folks in Heaven—now—'**

The self - presentation of the speaker as a wife is done with an atypical sense of confidence. The woman's identity is compartmentalized into two distinct stages—wifehood and girlhood, seen from the 'safety' and 'comfort' of wifely identity, girlhood is depicted as a state of 'soft eclipse'. Eclipse is a cosmic term. Eclipse is identified as the presence of man—being the authority of hegemonic society, he is ready to impose his own identity over her. When the speaker addressed the alleged oddness of 'the girl's life' in comparison to the wife's life, she uses such brilliant metaphor 'eclipse' for marriage. The adjective 'soft' in front of the metaphor seems to support the marriage tie, but an eclipse itself can indicate darkness and reclusion. As a wife she is able to view life from the sunny side and look back on the girl who on the far sees only a dark disk hiding the sun. Dickinson is a playing feminist. Through her curious sense of impish humour and slippery semantics, she satirizes the patriarchal society. The summum bonum of female existence is that of a wife. This construct of the female self is positioned in binary opposition to the image of the American male self, which is decidedly self - reliant and has for its 'other' the female, who is required to be docile in body and spirit, muted in expression, hesitant and insufficient in herself, complete only in the presence of her over lord, the husband. (Eclipse imagery). Dickinson compares the single -

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marriage issue to the Earth - Heaven scenario. Being single is represented by the harsh life and realities of the mundane Earth and a married woman's life is compared to being in 'Heaven'.

In the poem, the anti - marriage view is crystallized in subtle image 'soft Eclipse' suggesting the termination of a woman's independence in marriage. Dickinson was not the first American writer to incorporate both positive and negative views of marriage. Sara Parton, the author whose 'spicy passages' had influence Dickinson and many woman writers of the 1850s had studied tensions between womanly independence and hetero - sensual love. Dickinson was the first, to *fuse contrasting views in a single text and individual metaphors*. The literary fusion enables her to achieve a far more rounded view of marriage than was advanced by either the pro - marriage or anti - marriage groups. How subtle are the tonal shifts in the poem, as the persona wavers between the enthusiasm and scepticism about marriage! How potently does the phase 'soft Eclipse' communicate that cushioned banality she envisages in marriage! Marriage is a heavenly state of power in which woman gains safety and comfort but at the same time loses the painful but exhilarating self - sufficiency of maidenhood –i. e., reflected in Dickinson's own stylistic power, luminous poetic diction, and lyrical resonance.

**“This being comfort—then
That other kind—was pain—
But why compare?
I'm “wife”! Stop there!”**

The last stanza emphasises on Dickinson's feelings about marriage. She says that the marriage at the other side will bring comfort as she is pointing out the natural progression of a girl's life from wilfulness to marriage in “The soft Eclipse”, almost like she sees marriage as a relief from societal carping tongue and a shelter from pain, but pain is of another kind. These two lines transmit a mixed signal suggesting that the married life is finally painless or the opposite of it. 'That' pain comes from the reality of household. Husband and a wife are tied in marriage and may be happy. However, if they do not unite problem will arise and occasionally husband being the embodiment of patriarchal authoritarian society dominates his wife, tortures mentally and physically. Dickinson finishes the poem in an optimistic manner stating that marriage should not be compared because she is a “wife” and her thoughts should stop there. She ends in a cynical tone: with independence comes pain, so it is natural for women to stop at “wife. ” Wife's intellectuality, identity, rationality, as well as potentiality above all her own self should be confined within the husband. The last line of the poem echoes a patriarchal authoritarian commanding voice. Emily Dickinson through her daring jugglery of simplistic languages mocks the traditional society by going against the complete woman concept (as she was unmarried throughout her life). Her anti - marriage view is crystallized in subtle image 'stop there!’ suggesting the termination of a woman's independence in marriage. Capital letters and exclamation marks on the closing line of the poem show the frustration, unfairness and discrimination between men and women in Dickinson's society.

The abrupt finality with which the question of superiority of one state is imposed on the other, instead of stabilizing the question of a women's identity, alerts us to the possibility of destabilizing the patriarchal enterprise. By pitting this debate between the two states of a women's existence, Dickinson does not move towards a final assertion, in fact the sudden stifling of further discussion on the matter turns the arguments of the debate opaque. But out of this opacity emerges clarity around the instability of the identity that is bestowed on women. Dickinson plays upon this opacity/clarity opposition to inch towards an inquiry into the self - representation of women.

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