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## CHALLENGING SOCIAL SUBORDINATION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF EMILY DICKINSON'S "I'M "WIFE" - I'VE FINISHED THAT" AND "MY LIFE HAD STOOD – A LOADED GUN" AS POEMS OF FEMALE PROTEST

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### Abstract

This research paper critically analyses two thought-provoking poems by Emily Dickinson, namely "I'm "Wife" - I've finished that" and "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun", as poems of female protest that challenge the socially prescribed subordination of women in the nineteenth-century American society. Through a feminist lens, this paper examines the ways in which Dickinson's poetic expression serves as a powerful medium to question and dismantle gendered roles and hierarchies prevalent in her time. By closely examining the language, imagery, and themes in these poems, the paper sheds light on the underlying societal restrictions faced by women and the profound implications of their choices.

**Keywords:** Emily Dickinson, women's writing, female protest, gender roles, feminist reading

### Introduction

The paper is an attempt to analyse two poems by Emily Dickinson critically: "I'm "Wife" - I've finished that" and "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun" as poems of female protest, challenging the social subordination that women were subjected to in the contemporary times. Emily Dickinson's artistry transcends time, inviting readers to confront the historical marginalisation of women and inspiring ongoing conversations about gender equality. As we engage with her poetry, we discover a poetic genius who fearlessly confronts societal norms, shedding light on the struggles and aspirations of women in her era and sparking a dialogue that resonates even in the present day.

Emily Dickinson is regarded as an influential figure in the canon of women's writing. While only less than a dozen of her poems were published

during her lifetime, more than a thousand poems written by her were discovered and published posthumously. (Rich 179) An extraordinarily gifted poet who lived a reclusive life in Massachusetts, she has even been called Woolf's "Judith Shakespeare." (Gilbert and Gubar 583) Her poetry, marked by its reflective nature and lyrical beauty, has garnered significant attention, mainly through feminist readings that emerged during the second wave of feminism in 1960s America. Considerable interest has been taken in this endeavour since then.

This paper seeks to examine Emily Dickinson's poems critically, "I'm "Wife" - I've finished that" and "My Life Had Stood - A Loaded Gun," as expressions of female protest against the prevailing social subordination of women during her time. By examining the language, themes, and symbols employed in these poems, we can unravel the underlying challenges and limitations women

faced in nineteenth-century America. Dickinson's poetic voice serves as a vehicle for exploring the politics of gender and power, ultimately challenging the prescribed roles and expectations imposed upon women.

By delving into these poems, we can understand the complex relationship between gender, identity, and artistic expression within a patriarchal society. Emily Dickinson as a woman poet, can only be read with an understanding of the politics of the language and poetry she used. Dickinson composed "in a genre that has been traditionally the most Satanically assertive, daring, and therefore precarious of literary modes of women: lyric poetry." (Gilbert and Gubar 582)

The poem "I'm "Wife" - I've finished that" is a dramatic monologue replete with ironies as the speaker in the poem tries to rationalise her choice of being a wife. On the one hand, the speaker in verse says, " This being comfort- then" and "That other kind- was pain." (Dickinson, lines 8-9) But the poem doesn't explain what the pain is or how. The idea continues to be vague. So, the comparison seems flawed. The speaker in the poem has a similar understanding for her, who feels like a "czar" and a complete "woman" in the "safer" state of being the wife. Still, she is to make herself believe that being a wife is like being an empowered czar, for she ends the poem with the lines: "I'm "Wife"! Stop there!" (Dickinson, line 11)

The poem is a failed justification of a wife who attempts to ensure that the "other state" of spinsterhood is not as 'safe' as a married woman. The girls' lives, as it appears to the speaker in the poem, is how the earth feels "to folks in Heaven- now- ." (Dickinson, line 8) The idea of a "soft eclipse" is symbolic of marriage. Though a "soft" and smooth ride since the lady now has a husband to give her his name and protection in the society, it is still an "eclipse" where the woman is not man's equal but his subordinate. He eclipses her identity. It highlights the social scenario in nineteenth-century America, where an unmarried girl could not feel safe without a husband's protégé. Voting rights were yet to be given to women. All professional spaces and

choices were not available for them. Their position immediately became secondary to men.

This poem is about a woman or, for that matter, a woman representative of the women of century America who had to take upon the "feminine" role of the wife: the receptor rather than the creator, a passive agent, not an active one, one who lives eclipsed by the other in marriage. Having chosen the role, she wonders whether "that other state-" (Dickinson, line 2) was worth abandoning and tries to convince herself otherwise but fails to do so and thinks that the two stages shouldn't be compared at all and that she ought to be happy in her current position of a wife.

The paradox in the poem is that it is about choosing not to be a poet for that would not be "safe". It foregrounds the restrictions that existed for women in the times Dickinson wrote. According to contemporary societal conventions, the role of a woman was not to be a poet but a wife. The literary sphere was public, not private; hence, the men dominated it. The seven poems published during Dickinson's lifetime were heavily edited to fit the social demands of a "woman poet". (Rich 179) Through the poem, Emily Dickinson questions the hierarchical structure of gendered roles in the America she lived and wrote, one that marginalised women by assigning them tasks and offering them the least choices compared to men.

Another poem that follows the same line of thought is "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun". This poem is considered necessary for the feminist reading of Dickinson and seeks to represent the act of poetic creation as aggression and the power that poetry grants women. The narrator in the poem is a "loaded gun" which can be read as symbolic of the transgressive female who boasts about itself as a "deadly foe" for "None stir the second time- /On whom I lay a Yellow Eye- / Or an emphatic Thumb-" (Dickinson, lines 18-20) The gun can be interpreted as a woman poet fatal like the Vesuvius. The master in the poem, for whom a masculine pronoun is used, is spoken of and spoken for. The master becomes the muse, for it is he who brings about the charge of the gun. But the gun comes out as more powerful

than the master. The last lines of the poem read: Though I than He - may longer live/ He longer must - than I - / For I have but the power to kill, / Without - the power to die - (Dickinson, lines 21-24) meaning thereby that the power of the gun is greater than the master for the requirements of the master for survival are not the same for the gun as Gibert and Gubar argue, "The master, being human, must live, for instance, whereas the Gun, living only when "it" speaks/kills, may or may not be obliged to "live." " The master has the "power" to die, while the Gun, filled with aggression, has "but the power to kill", which lends it immortality. (Gilbert and Gubar 609)

The masculine pronoun in the poem, as Adrienne Rich argues in her essay "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson", Dickinson's poems can be read as numerous aspects of the "masculine" in a society dominated by patriarchy. It can be interpreted as "the male power-figures" in her life. (Rich 180) Rich rightly points out that the art of poetry, in this manner, becomes an art of metamorphosis. The woman's creative faculty uses and overcomes the 'masculine' factors in her life, and in the patriarchal and Puritan culture in which Dickinson grew up, it would empower a woman. (Rich 183) Knowledge and its assertion would immediately make her "destructive" through the realisation of the creative potential she holds and its subsequent articulation. The identity of the poet is a tussle between the master and the loaded gun in his possession. The gun is deadly enough to cause echoes in the mountains and create sparks across valleys, but the master must keep it in his control. It is destructive otherwise. Dickinson uses the symbol of a gun to describe the experience of a woman poet in her times.

The poem can be read as a continuation of the poem "I'm "Wife" - I've finished that", for it answers the question, "What if I'm not a Wife?" The role of the wife is of subordination. The wife naturally wishes to convince herself that she is still not powerless while she actually is. But if the woman refuses to choose between being subordinate and instead decides to assert an independent identity by becoming a poet, she is a "loaded gun" that society tends to keep in check, and its potency must be

restrained. She might be the aggressive, "unwomanly" lady who is unacceptable in society.

### Conclusion

The poems "I'm "Wife" - I've finished that" and "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun" by Emily Dickinson offer a critical exploration of women's roles and the power dynamics within the patriarchal society of 19th century America. Dickinson, an exceptional poet who defied societal norms by choosing a reclusive life, used her art as a means of protest and expression. Through her poetry, she questioned the hierarchical structure of gendered roles, shedding light on the limited choices and subordination faced by women of her time.

In "I'm Wife—I've Finished That," the speaker attempts to rationalise being a wife, highlighting the societal pressure for women to conform to the role of a submissive and subordinate spouse. However, the poem also reveals the underlying contradictions and limitations of this choice. Similarly, "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun" depicts the act of poetic creation as an aggressive and powerful force symbolising the loaded gun. The poem challenges the traditional notion of the female poet as a passive observer and instead presents her as a potentially destructive and formidable presence.

Both poems emphasise the struggle for agency and autonomy within the constraints of a patriarchal society. Dickinson's exploration of these themes resonates with the feminist movement that gained momentum in the 1960s and continues to be relevant today. By analysing Dickinson's poetry through a feminist lens, we gain valuable insights into the experiences of women in the past and the ongoing fight for gender equality. Through her thought-provoking and powerful verses, Emily Dickinson remains a timeless voice that challenges social norms and inspires readers to question and dismantle oppressive structures.

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