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## Identical Lifestyle and Disparate Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Zhaleh Ghaemmaghami

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### ABSTRACT

Two women poets, from two different social contexts, both celebrate their solitude in words; Emily Dickinson, an American 19<sup>th</sup> century poet, and Zhaleh (Alamtaj) Ghaemmaghami, a modern Iranian one. They similarly experienced dissatisfactory contacts with the male world that resulted in their isolation from their communities and a lonely life. Zhaleh was secluded as a divorcee, in a society where divorce was considered as an inconceivable and unforgivable ignominy. But, Emily chose solitary life more voluntarily since her lover left her. Although this solitude empowered them, through providing time and space as an opportunity to explore their inner abilities, they displayed a different perception of the similar situation. This paper attempts to depict that this seclusion, which becomes their constant companion and the source of inspiration for their artistic creations, functions differently due to the dissimilar cultural and social contexts they belong to and results in a different tone in their poetry. Zhaleh confesses the grievances and sufferings of her compulsory seclusion to the inanimate objects and blames her parents for her life condition. Moreover, she bitterly, criticizes the condition of women in the male dominated society of her own time. Emily, however, appreciates her seclusion as a holy gift and reveals her spiritual and metaphysical conceptions of life, death, marriage and nature. In addition, she does not involve in political or social issues.

**Keywords:** *Solitude, Culture, Modern Poetry, Emily Dickinson, Zhaleh Ghaemmaghami*

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### 1. Introduction

A lost lover or a callous husband, without them, Emily Dickinson and Zhaleh Ghaemmaghami would not be among the circle of 19<sup>th</sup> century women poets. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century American culture and Iranian society, the social connections and identity of a woman were due to a successful marriage, as the permission to enter the real society; the male dominated society. A failed matrimony life, an unfortunate love affair or widowhood shut these women off their community. Whether voluntary or involuntary, they both spend more than half of their lives imprisoned in their domestic life with none or rare connection to friends or family members, and that only through letters. The disappointment of an obsolete woman, cocooned in her strong sense of creativity and her keen perception of the world, delivered a highly elaborate poetic expression; Emily's eloquent, deceptively simple language and Zhaleh's daringly unique poetry. They were both transformed to eminent poets.

Although they belong to two quite distinctively different cultures, they led a forlorn life within the walls of their domestic exile, where they had no companion but poetry. Khalili and Ghadir have focused on their similarities in terms of their solitary life and their poetry, emphasizing the fact that despite their similarities, Zhaleh did not have any chance to read Emily's poetry since she did not know any English and the poems have not been translated into Persian at that time (2011). In other words, these two women from two different parts of the world, preferred to remain unanimous with no tendency to make their poetry public. Zhaleh burned a great amount of her writings and the only available source of her poetry is a small volume, which his son piled up by collecting the scattered papers buried among her belongings, books and boxes. This collection of poems is reprinted with seven critical analysis of her life and works by Roohangiz Karachi in 1383, entitled *Alamtaj Ghaemmaghami*. Regarding Emily, the "Auction of the mind of man" was the last thought in her mind. She



considered publishing her poetry equal to selling her thoughts and beliefs, so she highly despised it. "Publication –is the Auction/ Of the Mind of Man-/Poverty- be justifying/ For so foul a thing/ ..."(Dickinson, 1960 ,348) at her life time a few poems were published. After her death her sister found them and published more than one thousand poems. (Sewall, 1974) Lesley Wheeler looks at her poetry as the "poetry of confinement, where both form and content are enclosed. These images of enclosure are related to the poet's personal traits and the social expectation, favoring a closed condition for women. (2002)

Despite the fact that Emily and Zhaleh both decided to lead a solitary life their view to their exceptional life is not the same. This paper attempts to depict the differences between the attitudes of these two poets towards their solitude; their description of this seclusion and their reaction to it, by explaining the possible reasons of this variety. The different understanding of the concepts, including solitude results in the thematic differences in their works. Prior to the analysis of the thematic differences in their poetry a brief review of the social and familial background seems necessary.

## 2. Methodology

It is a comparative study between two poets and two Literatures. As Rene Wellek wrote in his *The Crisis of Comparative Literature* "the most serious sign of the precarious state of our study is the fact that it has not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology" (1663, 282) In comparative studies, researchers normally focus on the similarities or differences of two authors, regarding their family history, the recurrent themes of their works or any literary aspects of their writings. In some other studies they analyze the distinct conceptual perception of the authors. The possible resemblances of these two women have been studied as mentioned earlier. This paper, however, attempts to depict that although there is a likeness, they differ in their reaction to the same condition. To identify their cultural condition and personal lives their biography and the socio-historical condition of their contemporary time have been taken into consideration. The study departs from its basis, the sameness, to the different socio-cultural context they belong to and to the dissimilarities of their presentation of the same concepts, like solitude, nature, life and social issues. Their poetry is the reliable source to explore their insular land.

## 3. Discussion and Analysis

When it comes to the life of women in traditional societies, not enough evidences can be deciphered about their lives, Zhaleh is not an exception. She was born more than a century ago, in 1884, when the duties of a woman in Iran did not exceed the domestic borders of their life, and it means that social history does not provide enough information about her lifetime. The most reliable sources are her poetry collection and a brief biography that her son, Hossein Pejman Bakhtiyari, published posthumously. When she was five, her father sent her to the traditional schools of that time known as 'Maktab'. Her strong memory and her talent in fast learning helped her to learn Persian and Arabic in a very short time. Later she even studied astronomy. And in this way she spent all her years studying and learning, in her father's property in Farahan.(Karachi,1995)

Although she was not socially active, she was a well read and well educated fifteen year old girl. At about this age her father wed her to a forty year old uneducated tough military man, Ali Morad Panjeh Bakhtiyari, to save the family finance. It was the very first bitter experience of her encounter with the male world. She later complains about this marriage to her mother after she dies in the first year of Zhaleh's marriage; what if I never married mother?/ What if I never entrapped myself?/ My bones were too heavy for my father's back if and if I didn't marry? ".(Massiha, 2014) (from if I did not marry).

For Emily, however, things were virtually different. She was born in 1839 in Massachusetts to a religious family and died two years after Zhaleh's birth. Her father was a traditional tough demanding man whose dominance always haunted Emily's life. Moreover, for her things would be different if she was a boy; " It must have made a considerable difference to one's sense of self to have been a girl instead of a boy growing up in a context in which biblical history was the metaphorical framework in which human activity was viewed."(Homans, 1980) Unlike Zhaleh, she never married. She had an emotional relationship with a family friend, Charles Wordsworth, which remained unfulfilled. Her lover left her suddenly and since then she decided to stay within the walls of her parents' property. It was not the demand of social norms that kept her within the walls of her seclusion it was rather a self-imposed exile. Emily and Zhaleh, both lived secluded

lives because of the physical or emotional absence of their men.

Although Zhaleh and Emily gain their poetic strength in their loneliness, they belonged to two entirely different lives, set in different societies. In order to trace back the impact of their life incidents and condition on their poetry a brief comparative overview of their biography is provided in this part. When Zhaleh was twenty three, Iran experienced constitutional revolution, which was expected to transform the traditional society of Iran. It inaugurated the process of modernity and modernization in the country. The dramatically transformed mentality of the society was supposed to overshadow all other social matters including the issue of women. Prior to this revolution, women were portrayed, in Persian poetry, as the ideal obedient domestic beauty desired by men. Moreover, they did not perform any remarkable social or political roles. The Qajar dynasty preferred to keep women in the indoors of ignorance. They made the public to believe that an adorable woman is the one who does not have any knowledge, is illiterate and does not think about serious matters. (Babran, 2015)

But after the constitutional revolution, things started to change. Morgan Shuster wrote in his diary "after (1907) Iranian women are considered as the most modern women in the world." Following these social transformations the first journal published in support of women's rights was published in 1910 (Babran 2015). Although Zhaleh was not directly involved in the recent social changes of her time the new condition could not be ignored in providing the grounds for her to courageously present the woeful reality of her own life, as a pioneer, untouched by any modifying attempt. (Karachi, 1995) The dissatisfaction of her personal life and the social condition of women made her a cynical critic of the social issues related to women; like marriage, love and children. She was courageous enough to openly confess her desires and regrets, in a society and at a time, where and when, women were totally ignored as subordinate dependent subjects. (Taheri, 2016)

Emily, however, was born to a society where women had already started to fight for their rights resulting in successful signs of a brighter future. Moreover, modernization was progressing rapidly, in various aspects and layers of social and domestic life. Therefore, Emily could easily sit back and in

the peaceful white of her solitude, compose her lines. Engrossed in the deep perception of her seclusion, she selected her poetry as her best life time companion. Despite totally distinct social condition and characteristic differences, these two poets' confessional poetry exemplifies their courage to share their private secluded life and ideas with their readers.

Living with an unromantic, realist husband, who has spent most of his life struggling with the tough world of military life, was unbearable for an emotional narcissist woman, like Zhaleh. Her matrimony life of seven years ended up in divorce, leaving her no right of the custody of her 6 year old son, which was given to her father-in-law after the death of her husband. As a divorcee in a traditional society, where marriage was supposed to be a lifelong contract, she had no other choice but to imprison herself at home in order to avoid the blaming eyes of the public. The disappointment of a failed marriage and the separation from her son scared her sensitive soul so deeply that she could never recover. Emily even as a child was not very sociable, and the legendary seclusion at the age of thirty was her own preference. This prominent disparateness can explain the thematic differences between the poetry of Emily and that of Zhaleh. The overriding peace and tranquility in Emily's poetry reflects her peace of mind and satisfaction with her seclusion. But Zhaleh's poetry is replete with regret, disappointment and frustration.

Since Zhaleh was a narcissist (Karachi, 2011), she blames everyone, particularly her husband, for her fate but herself. She believed that she was an exquisitely beautiful and highly intellectual woman, whom should be adored and worshiped by a loving, romantic husband. Remember me and my sisters?/ All gathered in front of you, mirror!/ .../The most charming than others I was/oh Mirror! You know that real it was. (from Confabulation to the Mirror) (Massiha, 2014)

Her bitter language and unforgiving tone is a proof of her belief. Her poem "Man" is a reading of her mentality about men. "Who is man? This hollow figure, this nothing, as if his essence is mixed with bewilderment/ Who is man? But the breadwinner, / Made by the tear and blood of his wife" in another poem (Elegant Husband) (Massiha, 2014).

She describes the ideal man as an honorable, wise macho who must be very



tough and hardworking in society but considerate and compassionate at home. Despite all the dissatisfaction of her matrimonial life, she used to praise him and his manners since his death (After the Death of Husband). It is a proof that Zhaleh was too cynical and even in her seclusion she does not reexamine her ideas. Dr. Bastani Parizi writes that Zhaleh was ignorant about the shaved perfumed lazy modern men who could not even handle a calm horse! She was assuming that there would be a man who would love her books and poetry. (Karachi,2004) Zhaleh herself in lamenting her late husband contradictorily regrets her thoughts and wishes.

Emily, however, was surveying the infinite depth of life pondering on the meaning of doubt, death, God, nature and immortality which she was dealing with in her seclusion. Despite Zhaleh, she is in favor of her loneliness when she says: "I can wade Grief"(Dickinson, 1960, 252) or "I like the look of Agony" (Dickinson, 1960, 241) or "I hide myself within my flower" (Dickinson, 1960,903). The dominant tone of her poetry has a dash of spiritual hope and a heavenly peace.

Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul-  
And sings the tune without the  
words-  
And never stops -at all-

.....  
I've heard it in the chilliest land-  
And on the Strangest Sea-  
Yet, never, in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb of Me.(Dickinson, 1960, 116)

This is definitely not the only example. Her trust in the positivity of nature and life is represented in other pieces of her poetry like: "there's a certain slant of light" and "the spirit lasts". "I am nobody" is one of Emily's poems that clearly portrays her difference from Zhaleh in her understanding of 'self'. As mentioned earlier narcissist Zhaleh portrays her 'self' as a valuable one, that deserved more than what real life offered her cruelly. Emily, however, cries out that: "I am nobody! Who are you?/.../How dreary-to be-Sombody!/How public -like a Frog- /To tell one's name-the livelong June-/To an admiring Bog!" (Dickinson, 1960, 133)

Emily could fly beyond the earthly objects and step in the white realm of heaven, as a result of living in seclusion, when she finds the only way in the "abdication" of her 'self' from her. Pollak in her book *Our Emily Dickinson: American Women Poets and the Intimacies of*

Difference praises Emily's deep understanding of herself and life: "What would it be like to be the brilliantly conflicted, that partly repressed, that angry loving home keeping person, that Emily Dickinson?" (2017, 2) Zhaleh, however, was lamenting her aging and the lost beauty when asking the Mirror to lie to her. "Mirror! you can unleash my sorrow off me/brightening my heart lying to me" (Massiha, 2014).

The difference in their attitude, towards solitude and their lonely life, roots back in their mentality. Zhaleh's mind was obsessed with worldly matters, regret of the past, her unsuitable husband and the social traditions that acted against her. Emily, instead, found her way to heaven and she could feel the beauty of life, even in sorrow. One should not ignore the fact that Zhaleh felt the pungent reality of life, at very young ages. But, Emily was not involved in the realities as much.

As a compensation for deprivation of love and affection, Zhaleh continued accusing her family and her husband (Non-intimate Husband), of insensitivity and criticizing the traditional values of society all her life. This thought is dominant all over her poems. In her loneliness she mostly addressed the inanimate objects of her household like, samovar, her comb, her sewing machine and her mirror repeatedly (Mirror, Mirror and Woman, Night of Horror, Request from Mirror, Confabulation to the Mirror,) confessing her desolate days and nights. She criticizes her arranged marriage, the unjust manner that men and women are being evaluated (The Rights of Men and Women, Woman, Widowed Woman, Forlorn Son) and cries out to other women to make a change in their lives (Piece of Advice to Sisters, Message to Future Women).

#### 4. Conclusion

Emily Dickinson and Zhaleh Ghaemmaghami lived a secluded life under different social and emotional circumstances. Their thoughts and ideas or their understanding of life is reflected in their poetry. Although they both took refuge in poetry there are significant thematic differences in their works. Moreover the effect of their isolation was distinctly different on their poetry. The similar patriarchal domination in their lives was limiting but Emily could get along with it very well to an extent that she is believed to select such a lifestyle, surpassed it and finally expressed her understanding of life,

death and nature in her poetry. Zhaleh, however, always remained critical and cynical to her life which was mostly spent in solitary and regret. Their personal character traits depict deep differences as understood from their poetry. For Emily this solitude purified her and would be rewarded in the life after death, but Zhaleh could never forgive her parents and her husband who deprived her of worldly pleasures and rights. Her poems cynically signify this hatred and negative spirit.

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