

Actualizing Identity, Self-Actualization in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

Nasim Zahedi Doost^{1*} and Leila Baradaran Jamili²

- 1- MA Student of English Language and Literature, Islamic Azad University, Boroujerd Branch, Iran
- 2- Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature, Islamic Azad University, Boroujerd Branch, Iran

Corresponding author: Nasim Zahedi Doost

ABSTRACT: Searching for or actualizing identity is to become what one truly is, indeed, self-actualization refers to the fact of using one's ability to achieve the meaning of life as much as he can. Having a strong identity, which helps people to be successful in their life, needs a strong self-confidence. Actualizing identity helps man to find a sense of selfhood resulting in or leading to a sense of self-actualization. In this sense, Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830-1886), the American poet, who was greatly influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1803-1882) doctrine of self-reliance, attempts to reach self-actualization. Dickinson's poems, offering the power and completeness of self, show a theme of selfhood, autonomy and self-actualization. For instance, "The Soul Selects her own Society," "On a Columnar Self, You'll Know it," and "I'm Ceded—I've Stopped Being Their's—" are some of her famous poems, which contain a lot of signs of actualizing identity and self-actualization; they also emphasize the soul's power. The present paper uses the theory of self-actualization by Abraham Harold Maslow (1908-1970) and Carl Rogers (1902-1987), to challenge and analyze different aspects of actualization, and self-actualization in Dickinson's poetry. It develops this idea that Dickinson, as a spiritualist and a self-actualized poet, consciously chooses such a subject for her poems.

Keywords: Identity, Soul, Selfhood, Self-Reliance, Self-Actualization.

INTRODUCTION

Actualizing identity and self-actualization are two of the main fundamental drives in human nature. They are the ultimate needs in human's psyche which appear when the primary needs are satisfied. Actualizing identity is "becoming what one truly is" (Maslow, 1970) and self-actualization refers to the fact of using one's ability to achieve the meaning of life, as much as he can; it means "what a man can be, he must be" (Maslow, 1943). Carl Rogers similarly wrote of "the curative force in psychotherapy, man's tendency to actualize himself, to become his potentialities to express and activate all the capacities of the organism" (38).

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830-1886), during her life, experiences loneliness, and this isolation helped her to reach a perfect self. Her silence paves the way to improve her creativity which is, according to Abraham Maslow, the sign of those people who reach self-actualization. The readers of Dickinson can find the subject of identity and actualize it in her poems. Self-actualized people are fully aware of what is going on in their internal world and what is going on in their external world. Dickinson was such a person who was aware of her inside and outside world as well. Rogers believes that self-actualized people have productivity which comes from the feeling of "freedom" (qtd. in Nye, 105). Dickinson states such freedom as wealth and those people who do not search for freedom as people in penury.

This paper searches for identity and tries to find how the poet reached self-actualization. It proves that how Dickinson under the influence of transcendentalism and the theory of self-reliance moved toward constructing and forming her identity, reached self-actualization, and found her real identity. There are some interesting points of her life in chronological order which helps to show that how during her literary career and life her identity has been completed. It develops this idea that Dickinson, as a spiritualist and a self-actualized poet, consciously chooses

such a subject for her poems. For instance, “The Soul Selects her own Society,” “On a Columnar Self, You’ll Know it,” and “I’m Ceded—I’ve Stopped Being Their’s—” are the most famous poems in which Dickinson applies her self-actualized characteristics.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To analyze Dickinson’s poetry, the doctrine of self-actualization from Abraham Maslow’s and Carl Rogers’ point of view is used in this paper. The concept of self-actualization was brought most fully to prominence by Maslow in his theory hierarchy of needs as the final level of psychological development. This concept can be achieved when all basic and mental needs are fulfilled and the actualization of the full personal potential takes place.

The psychologist Maslow feels that self-actualization does not determine one’s life; rather, it gives the individual a desire, or motivation to achieve budding ambitions. The same vision can be found in Dickinson’s image of death in her works by which she recognizes her identity. Reading Dickinson can reveal a plenty of her poems which deal with death through which she meets an actualized self. Under the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s philosophy regarding self-reliance, she describes a transformative experience of ‘Self Realization.’

Maslow uses humanistic approach to suggest a new theory as self-actualization. He believes that people have lower order needs that in general must be fulfilled before high order needs, “physiological, safety, love, and esteem needs” (Maslow, 1970). He believes in hierarchy of needs and shares them in five levels which should be satisfied in order to reach another and higher level of needs. Essentiality of higher needs begin with asking to achieve ordinary needs which have particular aim like asking for food. Next level of needs can be defined as need for “safety, love and self-esteem” (ibid, 5). When these needs are met then man goes forward toward the actualization of identity. Actualization of identity is a term used in many psychological theories and in different ways. The term is driven from self-actualization which means the fact of using one’s abilities and skills to achieve as much as one can possibly achieve.

According to Rogers, self-actualized people are more creative than those who are not self-actualized; they accept reality of human nature; “prize themselves and prize the others” (qtd. in Thorne, 34); are spontaneous, natural, and genuine; they need more privacy and solitude than do others. Because they are confident and believe in their ability they have less need for popularity or praise; they almost make less friend but a strong friendship. They are strongly ethical and moral in individual ways; they feel brotherhood with all mankind. In fact they can take or leave conventions; they are original and inventive, with a fresh, naive, simple, and direct way of looking at life. They tend to do most things creatively. After defining realization of identity and self-actualization the third part uses the term in the poetry and especially Dickinson’s poetry.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dickinson unconsciously tries sometimes to actualize identity and construct self simultaneously, which demonstrate the actualization of the poet’s self. The present paper aims at revealing how Dickinson under the impact of transcendentalism and Emerson’s philosophy and theory of self-reliance moved toward formulating her identity, getting self-actualization, and finding her real identity. There are some interesting points of her life in chronological order which helps to show that how during her literary career her identity has been the subject of metamorphosis and change. To prove this idea her life and works are studied and related points are used in practice. Actualizing hints and points offered by psychologist Maslow help the researcher to show the signs of self-actualization in Dickinson’s life. The researcher has tried to show this self-actualization in her behavior and mostly in her works. She shows a great number of signs of self-actualization in her works; she is creative, genuine, philosophic, and self-esteem in her life and creates some poems which prove these personalities like no need for popular praise. She consciously chooses loneliness in order to have more privacy.

Actualization of Identity in “The Soul Selects Her Own Society”

“The soul selects her own society” (abbreviated SSS) is a famous poem which has been interpreted from various points of views and philosophies. Very clearly the poem is marked by self-actualization and it emphasizes the soul’s power that makes her own rule and has no boundary for her. Dickinson has applied her transcendental view in this poem and reveals lots of sings of self-actualization. In this poem she comes to search for universal truth and some conditions of human being and she answers the questions of God and truth, she also searches for finding human’s place in the universe:

The Soul selects her own Society—

Then—shuts the Door—
To her divine Majority—
Present no more—
Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing—
At her low Gate—
Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat—
I've known her—from an ample nation -
Choose One—
Then—close the Valves of her attention like
Stone—(SSS, lines1-12)

In the beginning line she starts to talk about the soul and its power, to select her place and put out the rest of the world; she just focuses on the soul's power "The Soul Selects her own Society/ Then—shuts the Door." Dickinson here mentions that the soul has the ability to do whatever is in its domain. Such belief in power of soul shows how she actualizes her identity and catches the pure soul of her childhood. According to Rogers, as an infant man starts "knowing" (qtd. in Nye, 106) s/he recognizes what is good and what is not good for him in the life, what he likes and what he dislikes in his life. By getting adult he loses such a power and many of his "organism valuing process"; however, he wants to be accepted and be loved by the others; in this stage man needs a "positive regard" (ibid, 106, 107) from the others because he loses many of his soul's capabilities.

In this poem the reader sees how Dickinson reaches self-actualization and feels no need for such a positive regard, she just asserts that the soul will select her own place and then shut the door. By expressing such independency which springs from her hope and satisfaction regarding herself, she brings the idea of self-actualization in this poem, and shows that no one or no place is no more important than her own self. She is rejecting some values which are thought to be good at school, in church, social conventions, and in the poem she shows that positive regard of the others is not important to her, and she "self-regards" (ibid, 107) herself and her soul. She does not let anybody enter and help her soul to select a place. In a great number of her poetry she talks about hope and this hope is one of the signs of her self-actualization.

The poem "Hope is the Thing with Feathers" (abbreviated HF) is about the origination of hope. This work also explains where hope resides within the body, or within the soul. Hope resembles the metaphor of a bird within this poem. By referring to the bird, Dickinson refers to the subject which is hope. The bird sings a tune without words may mean that its presence is there without having to make it blatantly known.

Dickinson then begins to explain that the bird's song is the sweetest song during the storm, when the human soul searches for hope more than any other time. Hope keeps man warm even when it brings him/her to a very undesirably cold and uncomfortable place. Sometimes hope is found in the strangest lands, or in context, the strangest places where man would not normally expect to find it:

I've heard it in the chilliest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me. (HF, lines 9-12)

In the above stanza, Dickinson uses a particular type of writing style, the sweetest visualization of nature, "the chilliest land," "the strangest sea," to express her point of view on the subject of the sweetest, and loveliest hope. This poem reflects the philosophy of self-reliance; which is pretty much relying on oneself before going off in an attempt to help others. Dickinson herself used self-reliance while writing this poem because she had to find the independence within herself before she could be at peace.

The power she feels in her soul is so much great and influential which helps her to reach whatever she wants. Since actualization of identity differs from one person to another, this actualization in Dickinson's case strengthens her sense of power and authority. It gives her an artistic and poetic right and frees her from the other's judgment. She does not feel that she needs to be changed by anybody's idea. Dickinson uses different words in order to show and illustrate how she is happy with her meaningful life and how she is a satisfied and well-developed individual who has a positive function in society. Self-actualized people are superior, according to Maslow "whenever a comparison is made they are after all superior people—is more easily solved or at least managed-by the transcendental poets than by the merely healthy self-actualizers" (Maslow, 1993). In the case of Dickinson it comes from the opposite view, because by studying Emerson's essay of self-reliance, she was encouraged to actualize her own self.

Like “The Soul Selects her Own Society,” there is another poem which insists on the power of soul as an authority, titled “Me from Myself—to banish—” (abbreviated MMB), written in 1863 one year after “The Soul Selects her Own Society.” This is the imperial soul that makes its own rules and sets its own boundaries; it is the “Columnar Self,” a solid, unitary structure, upon which the poet can rely. The tone of the poem would be cerebral; i.e. a speaker solves a problem in logic. The omission of words is necessary in order to eliminate the elements of the speaker’s dilemma down to a few and to isolate the two primary antagonists, ‘Me’ and ‘Myself’:

Me from Myself—to banish
Had I Art—
Impregnable my Fortress
Unto All Heart—
But Since Myself-assault Me
How have I peace
Except by subjugating
Consciousness? (MMB, lines 1-8)

In the first stanza, the speaker is ‘Myself’ while ‘Me’ is the ‘Other’. In the second stanza, Dickinson reverses the terms, calling herself ‘Me,’ while the ‘Other’ is ‘Myself,’ as well as ‘Consciousness.’ She asserts her desire for peace and calls it through the consciousness. Maslow believes that “desires flit through consciousness are most often desires for friendliness, company, praise, prestige, and the like which are secondary and cultural drives” (1970). But in Dickinson’s poem this flit comes to fulfill her first psychological need. Since these are not so important to man, he does not pay attention to them rather to their important needs like hunger. On the contrary Dickinson is going to find her identity as the most important need. Finally, in the third stanza their identity is made explicit, as both become ‘Me’:

And since we’re Mutual Monarch
How this be
Except by Abdication—
Me—of Me—? (MMB, lines 9-12)

The power Dickinson gives to soul, in this poem, makes it like a queen in her “Mutual Monarch” whose many emperors kneel before her. The idea of a spiritual union with a beloved person is more explicit in several other Dickinson’s poems, but none is as brilliant and outstanding as this poem.

Self-Actualization in “On a Columnar Self, You’ll know it”

Maybe one of the famous poems in which Dickinson focuses on the self and self-actualization consciously is “On a Columnar Self, You’ll know it” (abbreviated OCS). The poem is written in 1863 and in which Dickinson clearly affirms the sense of inner rightness and shows that she is independent from external judgment. By the time she was seeking for an answer of rejection of praise or advice, from her literary sister-in-law Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911) for her poetry, her reaction was:

On a Columnar Self—
How ample to rely
In Tumult—or Extremity—
How good the Certainty
That Lever cannot pry—
And Wedge cannot divide
Conviction—That Gramtic Base Though
None be on our Side—
Suffice Us—for a Crowd
Ourself—and Rectitude—
And that Assembly—not far off
From furthest Spirit—God— (OCS, lines 1-12)

Dickinson develops her belief on self-reliance and sees the self as an unbreakable ‘Column.’ She suggests an indissoluble, immanent, and unbreakable image of self resisting against all sufferings and problems. She uses “Conviction—that Gramtic Base Though” as the source of this poem and the word conviction does not convey just the meaning of thought but deep thought rooted in spirit. In the last line of this stanza she focuses on the self-sufficiency and tries to give priority to individuals than crowd. She celebrates individuals’ self and confirms that one’s soul suffices than crowd.

Dickinson, like any other person, especially a poet, has searched for her self-esteem and tried to meet her needs. As an adult she needs to actualize her own self and her moral and spiritual needs are to be reached. Maslow believes that everybody's needs are different during his/her life:

Any individual at birth shows physical needs, and probably also, in a very inchoate form, needs safety, e.g., it can probably be frightened or startled, and probably thrives better when its world shows enough regularity and orderliness so that it can be counted on. It is only after months of life that an infant shows the first signs of interpersonal ties and selective affection. Still later we may see fairly definitely the urges to autonomy, independence, achievement, and for respect and praise over and above safety and parental love. As for self-actualization, even a Mozart had to wait until he was three or four. (1970)

Dickinson as well is not away from this rule as a child she had some physical needs and as an adult girl she followed the self-reliance theory and succeeded to actualize her identity. Such self-reliance is obvious in many of her poems. For instance, in "On a Columnar Self," she tries to prove that morality and individual's soul can give him strength in a society and show that she needs no admiration from external judgment. She trusts to her soul and celebrates all the joys of her actualization and realization, indeed, her poem reaches the reliance on self.

Dickinson tries to show that human source of unique experience is man's soul. Maslow believes that people can be mature or genuine from their unique experiences like "depression, illness, marriage, children, failure, falling in love, death etc." (ibid, 281). In the case of Dickinson her poetic imagination is the source of her maturity by which she develops her sense of self-realization. In first two stanzas of "On a Columnar Self," by offering an architectural image of self she works as an architect who makes a strong building remain for centuries. The image of granite, a very hard stone, for the base of her column can spring from her studies on geological theories of the famous geologist "Edward Hitchcock at Amherst Academy" (Leiter, 157). The most significant idea states in this poem focuses on the very hidden and deepest layers of the spirit.

In next lines the architectural image changes to the simple image of self-sufficiency in which she prefers individuals to crowd. In "None be on our Side—/Suffice Us—for a Crowd/Ourself—and Rectitude" (OCS, lines 8-10), Dickinson uses some words, like "our," "our self," "us" to refer to any individual in this world. She portrays and visualizes a supported self by bringing the word "rectitude" at the end of the stanza. Dickinson finds the source of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness out of herself as she uses the words "Rectitude" and "And that Assembly—not far off/From further Spirit—God—" (OCS, lines 11-12) to show that she believes in herself and searches for authority and a kind of self-satisfaction. Whereas using such words makes an ambiguity in recognizing the meaning, it seems that it refers to the afterlife, or to those saints whom she may visit after death, but soon after such understanding he/she comes to this idea that Dickinson accounts herself at the highest part of all she valued.

Celebration of Self in "I'm Ceded—I've Stopped Being Their's—"

This poem, "I'm Ceded—I've Stopped Being Their's—" (abbreviated ICSB), was composed at the age of thirty two when Dickinson felt a sense of independency. It seems that there is no ambiguity in it and the poem points to a new identity gained by Dickinson while putting away her old identity. She parts and gets away from everything given to her by her family, church, and society. She has reached a realization of her real identity not the old one given by the others, but a new one that she herself has gained:

I'm ceded—I've stopped being Their's—
The name they dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished using, now,
And they can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading—too— (ICSB, lines 1-7)

The first line of the poem is clearly started by poet's claiming of getting tired of being the others. Dickinson proclaims her full independence of whatever she was given by her family and church, when she was a child. She starts with the words "I'm ceded" to show that up to now she has been surrounded by a strange power and an authority. She is not interested in having the titles given to her by her family and society. The Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary, defines 'cede,' "to give somebody the control of something or power and right, hence she asserts that she is liberated" (OALD 2010). Dickinson represents a great self-esteem which leads her to actualize her own self and keeps her far from the others even religious people.

According to Maslow the "people with low self-esteem tend to be religious than people with high self-esteem, but obviously there are many other determinants of religiosity as well" (1970: 297). Dickinson proves that she is not eager to be religious more. She asserts that she has rejected anything made by Calvinist church or her family.

Therefore, like the other self-actualized people, who can choose to accept conventions or not, while escaping from commonness; Dickinson tries to reject those common conventions.

Dickinson asserts that she has realized her identity and has stopped to live under the others' influence. She feels free from all boundaries and comes into this belief that she can live independently, independent of all rules and traditions which may limit her behaviors, belief and life. Dickinson recognizes a progression of personality as actualization, growth from a shallow girl to her fully realized potentiality in which she hears her true self-given name. The growth of soul is so much completed that she has reached maturity now. No one can decide for her, maybe for her "Dolls," the society can just control her dolls with no power upon themselves even religion is unable to affect her but her dolls. The word "Dolls" makes an ambiguity in the poem which at last leads her to recognize her identity. This word, first, symbolizes her childhood, which has been finished and replaced by actualization of self-realization of self's power; and on the other hand it refers to this idea that people who follow the society's rules are just like a doll in society's alphabet. They have no personality and no choice and it is no clear what the meaning of life for them is.

In the second stanza Dickinson goes forward by pointing to self-actualization directly. She is not going to accept the society's norms and feels free from them all. She recognizes that everything people do is just under the influence of society with having no control on it. "Baptized, before, without the choice," (ICSB, line 8) shows being under the influence of society like a new-born baby taken to church for being baptized. But now it is the time of being conscious and realizing her own identity, this is the time to reach one's fully potentials and it is the time of choice, rejecting, and determining as she chooses just a "crown" as a symbol of power. She has actualized her identity and now is the queen of her own room, her own domain, and her own self.

As she claims she has passed her childhood and now she has reached maturity and self-actualization. She has put away the identity given to her at her birth and her childhood and its games. She has changed her passivity to an active role and does her activities consciously as she brings "consciously, of Grace" (ICSB, line 9) in her poetry. According to Maslow, this is the feature of the people who receive self-actualization to indicate that they do all their bests to be "creative" individuals (1970) and they can truly create artistic works. The self-actualized writers are able to control creativity in their life. This creativity is not necessarily identical to mental-health and self-actualization; however, it is an important component.

Further, the more one comes to define creativity as a lifestyle, a way of living and perceiving, the greater is the overlap. Creativity is clearly more than producing new ideas in art, science, or even business; it can refer to the process of composing a poem as well. The time when Dickinson created this poem was the years of flood of her creativity, when she was coming to her full power as a poet and composed lots of poems. In lots of her other poems in these years she celebrates her selfhood and shows her satisfaction of her actualization of self. She believes in herself and her talents so much that she encourages the other people to actualize themselves as well.

CONCLUSION

There is no happy life with having no good sense of self. Having self-independency and knowing one's own self as an effective man with high quality always create a good feeling of life. Being independent helps man to gain the feeling of knowing his/her own self and forming his/her identity. A strong, powerful identity helps man to choose his way and decide correctly about any subject during his life. This self-actualized man is completely familiar with his potentiality and power; just self-actualized people may have strong and stable identity.

Dickinson as an American poet was under the influence of Emerson who brought forth the doctrine of self-reliance. Many writers and poets followed this doctrine at that time. Among those Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), Walt Whitman (1819-1892), Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) were the poets whose works reflect selfhood and self-actualization. Dickinson, indeed, created lots of poems which reflected self-actualization. "You'll know it—as you know 'tis Noon" is her first poem in which she converses with the nature as a subject in common with transcendentalists and represents her transformative experience of self-realization.

In a number of her poems she deals with the doctrine of self-reliance and chooses loneliness consciously and has lived alone for years which helped her like other transcendental thinkers to meditate and form her real identity and find her potentials. Getting actualized brought a flood of creativity and during these years when she reached her self-actualization, she created most of her famous and powerful works. Many of her poems like "The soul selects her own society," "Me from Myself—to banish—," and "On a Columnar Self, You'll know it," celebrate self and tell us how Dickinson was satisfied by her identity and how much she is familiar with her abilities. In these poems she felt a sense of independency, and soul's power which makes her be able to do everything. In "The soul selects her own society," she gives us a sense of imperial soul which rules its domain and makes it a unitary powerful structure in "On a Columnar Self, You'll know it." Dickinson's poetry assures us that she has reached the

self-actualization and already most of her poems, offering power and completeness of self and its purity, prove such a theme.

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