

# *A Comparative Study of Female Imagery in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Zhai Yongming*

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**Abstract:** Zhai Yongming and Emily Dickinson are two modern poets who are particularly concerned with women's issues. Both poets use a female perspective to look at themselves and the human world as a whole, even if in distinct ways. Previous academics have concentrated on the feminine imagery employed by Zhai Yongming and the feminine issues generated from Dickinson's natural imagery separately. This dissertation will investigate how Zhai Yongming's, and Emily Dickinson's poetry reject or criticize patriarchal-centered culture through female imagery that associates with sexuality and animality, and explore how feminine consciousness traverses' geography, time, and nation. This comparative study indicates that for Zhai Yongming, women have recognized their own particularity and are seeking to break free of their confines but suffer from problems. For Dickinson, women have been so undervalued and subjugated by society that their voices of opposition are weak. This study establishes the framework for future research on women's poetry, proposing suggestions for comparing Chinese and Western poets, and hoping that scholars might use the imagery of both poets to re-examine the challenges women confront in society today.

**Keywords:** Zhai Yongming, Emily Dickinson, Female Imagery, Female Poetry, Female Poets

## 1. Introduction

Zhai Yongming (1955-) is a poet who should not be neglected in contemporary Chinese poetry writing, as well as a pioneer who initiated and gave female poetry a significant place in modern experimentation. In 1981, she began publishing poetry. Her series poem *Woman*, published in 1984, drew widespread notice in the poetry world and sparked a surge of "feminist poetry" in the mid-1980s. There have been many studies of Zhai Yongming's women's poetry, but they all center on Zhai's poetry of the 1980s from the standpoint of "night consciousness" or Zhai's poetry of the 1990s from the perspective of poetic metamorphosis, with little comparisons to international writers.

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), the full name Emily Elizabeth Dickinson, was one of America's greatest poets of the nineteenth century and is recognized as "the greatest poetess after Sappho." She isolated herself from society at the age of twenty-five and wrote poetry in solitary for thirty years. Dickinson never marries and left over one thousand poems for us. She left behind over 1,700 poems; however, only 7 of which were published during her lifetime, with the remainder published and made public after her death [1]. There are many scholarly articles on reading Dickinson's imagery via a gender lens, and many scholars have done distinct analyses of natural imagery, but there are nearly no scholarly papers on understanding the predicament of women in her imagery.

Elaine Showalter, an American feminist critic, divides feminist literary criticism into two broad categories in her book *Toward a Feminist Poetics*: first, "women as readers," an approach that takes the hypothetical female reader as the premise of the reading so that the reading is done from the female perspective, experience and values are at the center of the reading; and second, "women as authors," an approach that investigates women as meaning makers in texts by researching the history, themes, genres, and forms of women's literature [2]. The poem of Zhai Yongming and Emily Dickinson belong to the first main group because they shed light on the quandaries that women faced at the time. The biological gender of the author, according to feminist critique, is not the same as the narrative gender of the text; in other words, male writers can write from a female perspective, and female writers can write from a male perspective. True feminine consciousness, according to scholar Du, should be "a gender consciousness that struggles against a patriarchal-centered culture [3]." As a result, this essay will examine the imagery in Zhai Yongming's and Emily Dickinson's poems that reject or condemn patriarchal civilization, as well as how feminine consciousness transcends geography, time, and nation. Both poets, albeit in different ways, employ the female perspective to examine themselves and the human world as a whole. The research in this essay analyzes the gendered imagery used by two prominent female poets, not only to provide a framework for future comparative studies but also to encourage Western and Eastern scholars to pay more attention to the problems faced by women in their surroundings.

## 2. Imagery Concept in This Study

What is imagery? According to Ezra Pound (1885–1973), the leader of the Imagists, "an image is something that presents a complex of reason and emotion in a single moment [4]." The "objective correlative" reality is emphasized by T.S. Eliot in his analysis of Hamlet. The only way to express emotion in the form of art is to find an objective counterpart; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, or a series of events can be used as a means of expressing that particular emotion [5]. It is a new element that can be used as material for poetry. Anything that qualifies as imagery must be something concrete and perceptible and, at the same time, saturated with the poem's own emotions.

Female imagery refers to the author's conscious use of imagery to speak about and portrays women, explore female topics, or respond to issues faced in women's lives. Zhai Yongming and Emily Dickinson use different imagery in their poems and different points of contact with the issues but always discuss the same question: what is a woman? To whom do they belong? What kinds of lives do they lead compared to men?

## 3. Female Sex-Related Imageries

Both poets use the imagery of sexual organs - women's natural sexual organs are given symbolic meaning. The difference is that Zhai Yongming uses a dark entry point, using the sexual organ as a starting point to paint us the abyss of a woman's life. On the other hand, Dickinson uses physical imagery, using everyday objects and plants as mirrors as clitoral imagery for us to reflect on the current situation of women's exploitation in a patriarchal society.

### 3.1. Maternal Shadows

In traditional Western literature, the female body is also usually described as caves, abysses, hells, dark rooms, and more, thus alluding to the representation of "maternal shadows" and adding mystification to them. In *The Consciousness of the Night*, Zhai Yongming explains that for women, there is a shifting intuition between the individual and the night itself. She believes that women are born into a secret relationship with the darkness, which communicates through an invisible language. Darkness is both the first and last aspect of our nature, and it grows with us [6].

The mother's dark belly is the only place of pleasure where the child cannot see, but they do not fear but feel safe. In her *Song of Construction*, Zhai Yongming compares a mother's belly to a temple, to a better place than any other, as he writes: "My birthplace: a temple, a few dangerous rooms, a black tower high above to protect me: a local girl. The war has disrupted the birth of mothers, and the fetus looks out like a ghost but has no right to choose the time." <sup>6</sup>The child's attachment to the mother's womb contrasts with the mother's plight in the war. Unlike the unborn child, the mother does not feel safe. The fetus looks outward like a ghost, symbolizing the passive type of female fertility.

In almost every one of the twenty poems of the group *Woman*, there is a "night" mentioned: "I have witnessed the world/So I created the night to spare mankind" (*The World*), "I want to tell you that there is no one to stop the night/The darkness has entered this edge" (*The Edge*), and so on. It cannot help but ponder why Zhai chose "night" as the only one among many images representing women. Perhaps it is because the sun, as the representative of men, emits light that only favors men, and in this daytime world, women in the margins are like other people exposed to the flash, with no place to put their souls, so women have no choice but to retreat to the night world as opposed to the day. As Zhai claims in *The Consciousness of the Night*, a woman faces a completely different world from birth [7]. Does she project her life as hard as she can to create a night: to transform the world into a huge soul in the midst of various crises? In fact, every woman faces her own abyss—a private pain and experience of constant extinction, and constant recognition—and far from everyone is able to resist this balanced ordeal until destruction. Thus, the poet wants to "create the night to spare mankind", which implies the discovery and establishment of the world of the female self.

The seemingly contradictory imagery of "creating the night" and "there is no one to stop the night, the night has already entered this edge" is logically self-referential. In the former case, the night refers to the new home—a new womb, a new shelter that the author created for the women in the process of writing the poem. In the latter, the whole poem is about the crisis of a man and a woman having sex, and the night refers to what we usually refer to as the dark night—danger, destruction, terror. Through the depiction of the dark night, Zhai Yongming gives us the answer that women are an independent group belonging only to the arms of their mothers. In contrast to the socially dominant men, they have nowhere to put their souls and spend their lives searching for a dark, safe womb substitute, thus surviving.

### 3.2. Clitoral Imagery

Emily Dickinson uses clitoral imagery to rebel against the idea of male supremacy in society. Unlike Zhai Yongming, Dickinson's narrative perspective is always changing, and the reader cannot directly identify the narrator as a woman [8]. As Paula Bennet points out in her journal, clitoral imageries such as peas, pebbles, beads, berries, nuts, buds, crumbs was the central to Dickinson's writing [9]. A woman's knowledge and celebration of a part of her own self that can provide her with sexual pleasure without the aid of a man is downright revolutionary. Therefore, by Dickinson's use of this imagery in her work, she is encouraging women to take back their sexuality, identity, and rights from the patriarchy.

In the poem, *So bashful when I spied her*, Dickinson seems to recreate the narrator's tender search for a lover's clitoris and, therefore, sexual pleasure. For example, "So bashful when I spied her! So pretty—so ashamed! So hidden in her leaflets Lest anybody find— [10] "

"Leaflets" suggest that the subject of her poetry is "struggling" and "blushing," which is a direct reference to female orgasm. This poem's delicate voice is charming and highly emotional, as the audience can practically feel the narrator's tenderness as he or she approaches the subject. The concluding stanza of this poem, however, is the most intriguing and illustrative of Dickinson's judgment on feminine sexuality. The storyteller vows never to reveal to whomever he or she

performed this act of love. This type of behavior, regardless of the narrator's gender, must have been kept hidden at the time.

Object with clitoral imagery was made to illustrate the idea that female sexuality is associated with sin and negativity:

Adrift! A little boat adrift! And night is coming down! Will no one guide a little boat unto the nearest town? [10]

A "little" boat is looking for a companion and, eventually, "[gives] up its strife" and lets the ocean drag it down. The poem concludes with the boat "overspent with gales" and "shooting - exultant on!". The boat is the core of female pleasure in the poem; the subject eventually "gives in" to sexual passion and is overpowered by an "exultant" orgasm. However, she must first "gurgle down and down"; in Dickinson's culture, pleasure acceptance is linked with sin and humiliation [11]. The boat can only see the red dawn after succumbing to the alleged darkness.

The clitoral imagery of a poem criticizes the idea that women need to hide their sexual organs during intercourse, and the clitoral imagery of a poem shows us how, in the eyes of most people, the female organ is associated with the degradation of one's sin. These normally visible objects are strongly suggestive in image and language and are a good choice of imagery. Dickinson shows us another perspective in her poems: women are symbols of sin and belong to the appendages of men. Compared to men, they lead a constrained and unfree life.

### 3.3. Difference

Hence, where does such a difference come from? Zhai lived at a time when Chinese politics was evolving rapidly. According to Zhai's account, she believes she lives under the control of politics, and she is concerned with just how far it wants to control us [12]. She believes that women's lives are closely related to politics, so the poem about women finding their dark nights is also a call for women to get out of the captivity of male society. Dickinson lived a very conservative life. According to Caroline H. Dall, who gave a speech concerning women's rights at a meeting in West Newton, MA, in 1855, a husband was not "liable for any action against [his wife]", and he possessed "sole ownership of a wife's personal property and use of her real estate."<sup>6</sup>In addition, adultery was considered a "criminal breach of the marriage covenant". However, perhaps the most insulting of the laws was one stating that, after marriage, a wife lost her "legal existence," and was unable to make her own decisions regarding residence or property. So she wanted to explore the female body and the "loan" connection.

## 4. Female Perspective on Animal Imagery

Animal imagery is very important to the study of imagery. It has a unique role in expressing the author's implicit emotions, making the poems fuller in life and adding a sense of immersion. Compared with abstract imagery, this kind of imagery is easy to understand. Zhai Yongming uses the imagery of spiders and bats to support her theory of the night, while Dickinson uses her spiders to support her idea that women are imprisoned by society. The evidence can be found in both *Bats* and *The Gecko and I*.

To leave the shadows is to leave the "night" - the mother's womb. Bats, which live mostly in dark places, usually come out at night, usually roosting in trees, caves, or stone walls. The gecko, an ancient room, is ugly and equally unattractive, even intimidating. Both bats and geckos are creatures that are often found in the dark. They are both marginalized by human society [13]. Perhaps it is this marginality of the creatures themselves that coincides with the poet's own experience of marginality. Perhaps it is the marginality of the creatures themselves that coincides with the poet's own experience of marginality that makes the poet turn his attention to them.

If the poet finds intercourse and harmony between the sexes as a kind of solace, as hope after despair, when he sees everything and understands the unavailability of understanding between the sexes, then here we undoubtedly see the destruction of this hope. When readers realize that this lack of understanding also exists between the same sexes, this is no longer a problem for men and women but for all human beings: loneliness, isolation, and the lack of understanding.

In the poem *The Spider holds a Silver Ball*, the spider's silk is simply a ball of silver thread, not an innate instinct of the spider as if the spider does not spit out the silk itself but rather acquires it from somewhere else or from someone else. Although Dickinson does not explicitly state in the lines that the spider represents the female gender, the reader can easily read into the poem some of the feminine characteristics that the spider is endowed with, such as the weaving of the silver threads and the soft dance [11]. The poet compares herself to a hard-working spider. Although she also carries her own ambition and weaves a web, she seems much more helpless than Whitman's spider. The silver ball of thread in his hand does not seem to be the product of the spider's own hard work but rather a handout from some outside world, and the spider can only complete the web with the power of the silver ball of thread. In the process of weaving the web, the spider does not seem to be just trying to complete the web, for its movements are somewhat wary, and it seems to be dancing as if it is carrying an obligation for people to watch.

The spider in the poetess's poem is like a maid who spins diligently, but no one cares what she is doing. Unlike Whitman's spider in an open space, the spider in Dickinson's poem is trapped in a house, silently weaving a web in the corner of the house, not for the purpose of building a bridge to freedom but as a tapestry inside the house.

All that the spider strives to possess disappears on the broom used by the housewife for cleaning. The poet is undoubtedly aware of her femininity and is clearly constrained by her gender in her life and writing.

## 5. Conclusion

Female imagery refers to the author's deliberate use of imagery to speak to the portrayal of women in order to explore female topics or respond to challenges experienced by women in their life. In their poems, Zhai Yongming and Emily Dickinson employ diverse images, different points of touch with the themes, but they always explore the same issues. Both poets use sexual organ imagery - a woman's intrinsic sexual organ is given symbolic meaning. The difference is that Zhai Yongming begins with a gloomy entry point, the sexual organ, to picture the depths of a woman's life for us. Dickinson, on the other hand, employs physical imagery as clitoral imagery, using everyday things and plants as mirrors to represent the current predicament of women's exploitation in a patriarchal society. Both poets employ animal imagery to tell the world about women's situation. Zhai Yongming utilizes spiders and bats to promote her night theory, whereas Dickinson uses spiders to support her concept that women are imprisoned by society.

This comparative study finds that the answers to the three questions of women's identity are different even in different social, cultural, and political contexts. For Zhai Yongming, women have discovered their specialness and are trying to break out of their confinement but are suffering from many difficulties. For Dickinson, women have been so devalued and controlled by a society that their voices of resistance are weak, as the imagery in the book illustrates. Now that our society is in the twenty-first century, modern ideas are pouring into and out of our society. Feminists are becoming more and more common, and women are coming together to write and think about their identities. Some believe that all women's issues are common to the world, and while that is true to a certain extent, individual experiences are more a function of local circumstances. Even for two poets who can both reach into the hearts of people, there are subtle differences in the women's issues explored in their poems. It can be expected that future scholars will slowly transition from world feminism to

local feminism, like Zhai Yongming and Dickinson, who capture the surrounding environment, and the anomalies.

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