

From Imitation to Self-Discovery: The Staged Awakening of Female Subjectivity in Li Qingzhao and Emily Dickinson

Jieying Lu

College of International Studies, Guangdong Baiyun University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China
Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Macau SAR, China

Author Note

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jieying Lu, College of International Studies, Guangdong Baiyun University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China; or Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Macau SAR, China.

Email: lujieying21@outlook.com

Abstract

Ancient Chinese poet Li Qingzhao and American poet Emily Dickinson are prestigious female poets with great significance in both poetry and female writing. Guided by Elaine Showalter's three-phase framework (feminine, feminist and female) with the concept of creative life cycle, six poems from Li and Dickinson are appreciated and analyzed. It finds their female subjectivity advanced from imitation patriarchal norms to beyond the constraints and the creation of unique styles ("Yi'an Style" and "Dickinsonian Style"), setting subjective expression benchmarks for women's writing.

Keywords: creative life cycle, poetic works, Li Qingzhao, Emily Dickinson, female subjectivity

The study of female poets' creative life cycles has gained significant attention in feminist literary criticism. Li Qingzhao (1084–1155), a prominent Chinese poet of the Song Dynasty, and Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), a reclusive American poet, both demonstrate a profound evolution in their poetic works. Despite their differences in cultural and historical contexts, both poets experienced significant personal and societal challenges, which are reflected in their poetry. This study is crucial for understanding the universal and unique aspects of female poetic expression.

The idea of Creative Life Cycle is first proposed in the field of psychology and gradually being accepted as one of the cross-disciplinary theoretical concepts of literature research and psychology of art. It is not a concept of dividing only by the biological factor—age. In the field of literature study, Elaine Showalter (1977) claims that the three phases of women's literary subcultures:

In looking at literary subcultures, such as black, Jewish, Canadian, Anglo-Indian, or even American, we can see that they all go through three major phases. First, there is a pro-longed phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of *protest* against these standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of *self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. An appropriate terminology for women writers is to call these stages, *Feminine*, *Feminist*, and *Female*. These are obviously not rigid categories, distinctly separable in time, to which individual writers can be assigned with perfect assurance. The phases overlap; there are feminist elements in feminine writing, and vice versa. (p.13)

Previous studies have extensively explored the individual works and feminist themes of Li and Dickinson, neglecting a comprehensive analysis of their creative life cycles and the progressive development as female poets. This research fills the gap by providing a comparative analysis that highlights the shared and unique experiences of these two poets, offering new insights into feminist literature and poetic evolution.

Taking her life experiences in to consideration, Wang has carried out an intrinsic study

in Li Qingzhao's poems, dividing them into three categories, namely “闺阁词” (boudoir-related Ci poems), “流亡词” (exile-period Ci poems) and “晚年词” (late-life Ci poems). The emotions expressed in the works are getting stronger with the staged progression of Li's historic consciousness.

Similarly, Johnson has divided Emily Dickinson's works into three types based on a detailed study of her letters and manuscripts. Letters from 1842 to 1854 have recorded her personal life with ordinary language and expression. During 1855-1865, Dickinson showed her attempts to express her personal emotions and philosophical contemplations in large amount of correspondences. From 1862 to 1886, letters in this period witnessed Dickinson's personal style and pursuit in poetry—various themes and distinctive style.

Both Li Qingzhao and Emily Dickinson have infused personal emotions and their philosophical ideas towards life and society in their poetic works. Looking into their poems with Elaine Showalter's perspective of three phases of women writers, Li and Dickinson approached their literary achievement with different paces. However, they achieved in finding their own identity and obtaining subjectivity.

1. Feminine Stage (Imitation)

Li Qingzhao was born in a literary family. She could easily get access to literature and was allowed to write her own Ci poems, which is an extravagant hope for most of women in the history of ancient China, let alone in the Song dynasty. Before the second year of Li's marriage, she led a carefree and happy life. Traces of imitation mainstream literary works can be perceived in her early works besides their romantic and optimistic tone. Take “Dream Song” (如梦令·昨夜雨疏风骤) as an example:

Last night, scattering rains, sudden winds.

Deep sleep abates not the remaining wine.

Try ask he who rolls up the blind:

Thinking the begonia blooming as before.

Know it?

Know it?

Fattening leaves' green, thinning petals' red.¹ (Yip, 2003, p. 327)

When Li composed this Ci poem, she remained singled (approximately 16 years old).

Although her lush emotions and anticipation of life are reflected, language style was in accordance with the literary norms created by man-led society. Nonetheless, Li's attempt to fit in the circle can be picked up by "wine," "begonia," "leaves" and "petals." In ancient China, appreciating wine and flowers is considered as literati's elegance and good taste.

Similarly, Emily Dickinson also came from a wealthy family with strong religious attachment in New England. Not only in her letters did she unveil her effort of obeying the standards of traditional poetry. Her early poems echoes with most religious lyric poems for her association of microcosmic divinity: the blossom of a daisy flower or a dropping dew. It can be easily observed in her early work "There came at a Summer's full":

There came a Day at Summer's full,

Entirely for me –

I thought that such were for the Saints,

Where Resurrections – be –

¹ This English version is also translated by Yip Wai-Lim. The original Chinese *Ci* is: 昨夜风疏雨骤，浓睡不消残酒，试问卷帘人，却道海棠依旧。知否？知否？应是绿肥红瘦。

The Sun, as common, went abroad,

The flowers, accustomed, blew,

As if no soul the solstice passed

That maketh all things new –

The time was scarce profaned, by speech –

The symbol of a word

Was needless, as at Sacrament,

The Wardrobe – of our Lord –

Each was to each The Sealed Church,

Permitted to commune this – time –

Lest we too awkward show

At Supper of the Lamb.

The Hours slid fast – as Hours will,

Clutched tight, by greedy hands –

So faces on two Decks, look back,

Bound to opposing lands –

And so when all the time had leaked,

Without external sound

Each bound the Other's Crucifix –

We gave no other Bond –

Sufficient troth, that we shall rise –

Deposed – at length, the Grave –

To that new Marriage,

Justified-through Calvaries of Love – (Dickinson, 2015, pp. 152-153)

Everyday natural details are to convey spiritual truths. On the one hand, natural elements such as “sun” and “flowers” are adopted as the messengers of Divine. Puritans believe nature is not only a landscape but rather an evident hint that poets are expected to decipher such hints given by Divine. On the other hand, “summer’s full” symbolized personal spiritual fulfilment that has reached maturity as the “saints,” who are closer to Divine. Since “saints” are considered to have higher spiritual achievement compared to ordinary people. Summer is the second season of a year, inferring the second stage of human as well—adolescence. It is also the stage that Dickinson was at when she wrote this poem. Instead of letting her emotional impulse and affection to be free, she is also restrained by the disciplines over women in New England: restraining self-emotion. Thus, “Summer’s full” represents the spiritual fulfilment without mundane desires, therefore implying restraint, which is deeply rooted in Puritan tradition.

2. Feminist Stage (Protest)

During this stage, Li Qingzhao and Emily Dickinson displayed their positive attitudes

of seeking their own paths in poetry. Both poets were not satisfied and realized that their voices would not be heard by just strictly following the popular patterns by their predecessors. As a result, the two poets emerged their deep emotions in their poems.

Li Qingzhao experienced separation (from her husband) as well as social unrest. Her Ci poems began to carry the complexity of her personal feelings and emotions. Compared with the previous phase of expressing her restrained but free from personal obsessions, Ci poems created in this stage reflect a blending admiration for nature with subtle social critiques. Her style becomes more mature and reflective as can be better understood in “Tipsy in the Flowers’ Shade” (醉花阴·薄雾浓云愁永昼):

Veiled in thin mist and thick cloud, how sad the long day!

Incense from golden censer melts away.

The Double Ninth comes again;

Alone I still remain

In silken bed curtain, on pillow smooth like jade.

Feeling the midnight chill invade.

At dusk I drink before chrysanthemums in bloom,

My sleeves filled with fragrance and gloom.

Say not my soul

Is not consumed. Should the west wind uproll

The curtain of my bower,

You'll see a face thinner than yellow flower.¹ (Xu, 2007, p. 217)

There are mainly three changes. The first change is emotional object (image), transferring general emotion to personal experience. Objects in this poem, such as “incense,” “golden censer,” “pillow,” “chrysanthemum,” are exclusive memories with Li’s husband. These images may be common, yet they are the private experiences between this couple, making the emotions reflected in this Ci poem exclusive to Zhao Mingcheng rather than general description disciplined by social norms. The second aspect lies in emotional intensity. It is displayed from “the long day” and the burning of “incense,” turning sorrow into a perceivable length of time. The last verse uncovers Li’s profound impact of emotions on her physically. The third is emotional dimension. Apart from the affections and longing for her husband (separated for official transfers), Li also expressed personal anxiety about initial social unrest. Li proved that women’s emotions are not limited in a boudoir, but also can be extended to the connection of personal identity, destiny and social turbulence, expanding the boundary of women’s emotional expression.

Emily Dickinson is more aggressive than Li that the core of her protest stage is challenging the disciplines casted upon women. Around 1862, her refusal upon traditional marriage had triggered the shrinking of her social circle. She began openly challenging against social roles like “wife” and “lady.” Take “I’m “wife” — I’ve finished that” as an example:

I’m “wife” — I’ve finished that —

That other state —

I’m Czar — I’m “Woman” now —

¹ This English version is also translated by Xu Yuanchong. The original Chinese Ci is: 薄雾浓云愁永昼，瑞脑消金兽。佳节又重阳，玉枕纱厨，半夜凉初透。东篱把酒黄昏后，有暗香盈袖。莫道不消魂，帘卷西风，人比黄花瘦。

It's safer so –

How odd the Girl's life looks

Behind this soft Eclipse –

I think that Earth feels so

To folks in Heaven – now –

This being comfort – then

That other kind – was pain –

But why compare?

I'm "Wife"! Stop there! (Dickinson, 2015, p.94)

By using "I'm Czar – I'm 'Woman' now –", Dickinson deconstruct the sanctity and significance of marriage. Comparison and contrast of "Czar" and "Woman" questioned the relationship of power, posing a direct revolt on social discipline. In terms of personal emotions, fierce desire of alienating from traditional roles—wife—and earnest pursuit of independence as a "woman" or a "girl" are infused in this poem. At the same time, "odd" is used to describe such behavior of finishing the identity of a "wife," as it is also connected with "Eclipse." This natural element is no longer a message from Divine but the carrier of expressing private feelings. From the perspective of emotional intensity, apart from the diction, it is also presented in various punctuations. Dashes are so eye-catching that it is often seen as a tool of syntactic fragmentation. In this poem, dashes break down the continuous flow of discourse, they are also the connectors linking private expressions, symbolizing a woman's identity is broken down in

the traditional doctrines and being established by the woman's free will at the same time. Question mark and exclamation mark are also the propellers to increase the intensity of emotional swing, showing conviction of controlling discourse on her own.

3. Female Stage (Self-Discovery)

After being through the two stages before, this stage records not only Li and Dickinson's changing in emotional expression but also their breakdown of traditional poetry. Gradually, they have developed their own signature in poetry.

Li Qingzhao's late-life works are contemplative and introspective. Her poetry at this stage is marked by simplicity and profound reflection. This stage notes her transitions in emotional expression to intertwined multiple traumas (personal, era-specific and gendered). Li had presented the emotion of a deep overlap of the losses of the loved ones, the fall of a nation and the humiliation of women's survival. Meanwhile, emotional perspective was extended towards a bigger picture but personal narrative. "Slow, Slow Tune" (声声慢·寻寻觅觅) is one of the Ci poems that have achieved:

I look for what I miss;

I know not what it is.

I feel so sad, so drear,

So lonely, wither cheer.

How hard is it

To keep me fit

In this lingering cold!

Hardly warmed up

By cup on cup
Of wine so dry,
O how could I
Endure at dust the drift
Of wind so swift?
It breaks my heart, alas!
To see the wild geese pass,
For they are my acquaintances of old.

The ground is covered with yellow flowers,
Faded and fallen in showers.
Who will pick them up now?
Sitting alone at the window, how
Could I but quicken
The pace of darkness that won't thicken?
On plane's broad leaves a fine rain drizzles
As twilight grizzles.
O what can I do with a grief
Beyond belief?¹ (Xu, 2007, p. 403)

“I look for what I miss” vividly depicts a woman looking for the support for her survival:

¹ This English version is also translated by Xu Yuanchong. The original Chinese *Ci* is: 寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚。乍暖还寒时候，最难将息。三杯两盏淡酒，怎敌他、晚来风急！雁过也，正伤心，却是旧时相识。满地黄花堆积，憔悴损，如今有谁堪摘？守着窗儿，独自怎生得黑！梧桐更兼细雨，到黄昏、点点滴滴。这次第，怎一个愁字了得！

her late husband, lost cultural properties and a home. It is also a metaphor of woman's situation in a patriarchal society, seeking for identity as an individual. The image of "wild geese" is no longer limited to affections but enriched as instability. Li's emotions have become combined personal loss of the beloved with loss of the nation and era. Furthermore, Li has changed women's identity from personal narrator into the witness of an ear, endowing female emotions with historical responsibilities. Last but not least, restrained emotions have been expressed directly by "O what can I do with a grief" to reveal mental collapse of woman under multiple traumas, breaking down the women's stereotypes of remaining elegant required by the society.

Dickinson began to break through the confinement of poetry tradition and formed her personal style during this stage. Her bold alienation in forms and free expression in self-experience assisted Dickinson obtain the subjectivity in female consciousness. "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun" is a good piece of work to prove:

My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –

In Corners – till a Day

The Owner passed – identified –

And carried Me away –

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods –

And now We hunt the Doe –

And every time I speak for Him –

The Mountains straight reply –

And do I smile, such cordial light

Upon the Valley glow –

It is as a Vesuvian face

Had let its pleasure through –

And when at Night – Our good Day done –

I guard My Master's Head

'Tis better than the Eider – Duck's

Deep Pillow – to have shared –

To foe of His – I'm deadly foe –

None stir the second time –

On whom I lay a Yellow Eye –

Or an emphatic Thumb –

Though I than He – may longer live

He longer must – than I – (Dickinson, 2015, p. 369)

Awakening of female subject consciousness and maturity of Dickinson's unique style are the milestones of her creations in this period. She compares "life" as "a loaded gun," which is a symbol of control and power. Women are perceived as weakness and in need of protection. However, in the poem, "I" am empowered by the "gun"—"I" am powerful, rebellious and dominant. "I" have the ability to protect others: "I guard My Master's Head"; I can "speak" and responded: "The Mountains straight reply." From the sense of emotional expression, such

depiction indicates Dickinson's conversion of gender power. Women are the protectors instead of the protected, and they are capable of creation, speaking to nature, Divine, the center of power. The last two verses also carry Dickinson's idea that "I", or my piece of creation, live longer than "He," positively taking the dominant position. Dashes are the only punctuation used in this poem. Many other people used commas and periods, Dickinson used dashes to separate syntactic groups and extend the rhythm of the poem. They are more like to serve as the symbol to visualize emotion and thinking as well as the externalization of female inner rhythm. Completely abandoning traditional of patterned rhythm and rhyme, this poem adopts free rhythm and rhyme driven by personal emotion. With no regular length, tone and rhyme of verses, this poem is composed by "self-emotions" with any external constraints, which implies the subjectivity possessed by Dickinson in her works.

The analysis upon poetic works from ancient Chinese poet Li Qingzhao and American poet Emily Dickinson has witnessed progressive changes in their self-awakening and subjectivity straitening. With the concept of creative life cycle, the two female poets sought their paths with three phases: feminine stage(imitation), feminist stage (protest) and female stage (self-discovery). At the beginning of their creative life, Li and Dickinson inevitably followed traditional rules and doctrines of their times. It is the period that young female are in search of their own ways, that they are in the feminine stage of imitating some works to be accepted by the cycle which was dominated by male. During the feminist stage, personal features and preferences are gradually established and practiced in their works, from emotional expressions to innovative attempts of new forms. Li and Dickinson are freeing themselves from the shackles of the patriarchy—stereotypes of women. They have made bolder attempts in their

poetic works: infusing stronger emotions with distinctive forms and themes, making their poems content-oriented instead of form-oriented, taking subjectivity in emotional expression. At the female stage, unique style is formed and it has become a signature of each poet. Li's mastery of metrics and Dickinson's mastery of visual impact in forms have established "Yi'an Style" and "Dickinsonian Style" in poetry, building a benchmark for "autonomous expression" for younger generations in women's writing.

References

- Dickinson, E. (2015). *The complete poems of Emily Dickinson* (2nd printing, Reprint of 1960 ed., T. H. Johnson, Ed.). Little, Brown & Company (Canada) Limited.
- Showalter, E. (1977). *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press.
- Xu, Y. (2006). 宋词三百首：汉英对照 [300 Song Lyrics (Classified by Theme)] (Xu, Y., Trans.). 中国对外翻译出版公司 [China Translation Corporation].
- Yip, W. (Ed. & Trans.). (1997). *Chinese poetry: An anthology of major modes and genres*. Duke University Press.