

Images of Metamorphosis in Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Yu Xiuhua

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Despite being unnoticed women at the time, Emily Dickinson and Yu Xiuhua, two female poets of different generations and countries, their works shook the poetry world in a powerful way. Trapped in a small place in their lives, their poems express the same desire for love and the world. Through many metamorphic imagery, their poems transcend themselves from their small bodies, small rooms, and small villages to a vast spiritual world. Such kind of transformation helps the poets integrate poetry into their lives, break the “double bind” for female poets, and express their repressed love and self-assertion.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, Yu Xiuhua, image, metamorphosis

Introduction

“Metamorphosis” is derived from Latin “metamorphosis” and is originally related to witchcraft. The word itself refers to the change of form or structure, action or process of changing in form, and later turns out to be one of the most popular literary techniques in modernism period. Since it mainly focus on body transformation, the modernists use this physical deformation to accuse capitalism of alienating both human spirit and body. Apart from its role in the modernism, through symbolism, implication, metaphor, etc., the art of metamorphosis discloses the inner hidden psychological world of the subject (Hardie, 2006, p. 89). In the context of works of female poets, this technique enables them to get rid of women writers’ dilemma which is a “double bind” called by Suzanne Juhasz that it is “on the one hand, the impossibility of self-assertion for a woman, on the other hand, the necessity of self-assertion for a poet” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2005, p. 584). In Emily Dickinson’s and Yu Xiuhua’s poems, poets turn their bodies into different images and transform the verses into their lives, so that they can break the “double bind”, expressing their love and self-awareness that have been suppressed for a long time.

Literature Review

Emily Dickinson is regarded as one of the most influential and eminent American intellectuals of the nineteenth century. Born in 1830, Massachusetts, she lived a secluded life in her father’s house for decades. Though being called a “gentle spinster” by Ransom, Dickinson left the world with her “astonishingly prescient poetry that embodied principles of fragmentation, isolation, independence, and self-reliance” (Martin, 2007, p. 7). Most of her themes are about love, death, immortality and nature. Owing to her distinguished contribution to poetry, the Cambridge University Press published *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson* in 2007.

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The book is written by Wendy Martin, which details her life and analyzes her poems from the aspects of religion, industrialization, political culture, social movements, philosophical reactions, and the Civil War. In Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's co-authored book—*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*—they analyze Dickinson's poems and letters from feminism perspective. They believed that Dickinson herself becomes "both ironically a madwoman (a deliberate impersonation of a madwoman) and truly a madwoman (a helpless agoraphobic)" (Gilbert & Gubar, 2005, p. 583). Through the father-daughter relationship and Dickinson's portrayal of father in her poetry, Dickinson shows that women in her time were influenced by patriarchy and had to suppress their self-expression. Moreover, her "white dress" becomes "as much signs of her own psychic fragmentation as of her society's multiple and conflicting demands upon women" (Gilbert & Gubar, 2005, p. 622).

Yu Xiuhua, born with cerebral palsy due to obstructed labor, is called "China's Dickinson." When she posted her lines "Crossing More Than Half of China to Sleep With You" on her blog in 2014, it leads to a sensation. Liu Nian, an editor at Poetry, a leading Chinese literary journal, discovered Yu's poems. He admires her poems and thinks that "Her poems, among contemporary Chinese poems, are like putting a murderer among a group of respectable ladies... Everybody else wears fancy clothes, puts on makeup and perfume and readers can't see a single bead of sweat. But hers are full of smoke and fire—and mud and landslides. Her words are stained with blood" (Yu, 2021, p. 5). In the next year, Yu successfully published two volumes *In Such a Staggering World* and *Moonlight Drops on My Left Hand*. Shen Rui, a Professor at Morehouse College in Atlanta specializing in Chinese literature and feminism comments that "I think Yu Xiuhua is China's Emily Dickinson: extraordinary imagination and a striking power with language" (Yu, 2021, p. 5). Some domestic scholars start to pay attention to Yu's works. Li Haiying asserts that Yu's poems mainly describe erotic love and emotions, diving into the inner space of the body to explore consciousness and the world, exposing the abundance of passion and desire directly to the public (Li, 2022, p. 77). Owing to her peasant status, Wang Sisi attributes Yu's success to the essence of her poetry's exploration that all points to the spiritual problems of modern people who have been neglected under the background of a rapidly developing society (Wang, 2018, p. 20). This is what intellectual poets greatly lack.

The art of metamorphosis can trace back to as early as ancient mythology, the image of gods or people would often transform into plants or creatures, therefore highlighting the power of the gods. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, "the fairy-tale elements of metamorphosis distance the reader from the story by neutralizing the tragic and distressing" (Hardie, 2006, p. 164). Modernism, which emerged at the end of 19th century and flourished in the 1930s and 1940s, brought metamorphosis to another climax. Czech writer Kafka named one of his masterpieces after this word, *Metamorphosis*, which turns out to be a milestone of surrealism in 20th century. Its protagonist, Gregor Samsa, wakes up one morning and finds that he's transformed into a giant cockroach. When I checked the relevant papers on metamorphosis, I found that "metamorphosis" is often mixed with "deformation" in domestic articles due to the same Chinese translation, and "deformation" is usually related to "deformity" in oversea studies. According to both poets bodies morphs into another object in poems, metamorphosis' definition is more in line with the poetry. In this case, I choose "metamorphosis" as the entry point for comparison in this thesis.

There are relatively few studies focusing on the comparison between Dickinson and Chinese poets. Wang Dongze compares Dickinson and Shu Ting on gender discourse in their poetry. In Gong Gang and Xie Bing's article, they pay attention to the similarities and differences between Dickinson and Yu in terms of their lives, personalities and poetic arts. Owing to the limited research, the comparison study of Emily Dickinson and Yu Xiuhua is worthwhile. Through the analysis of the images of metamorphosis in their poems, this thesis is going to study that such transformation helps poets integrate poetry into their lives, break the "double bind" for female poets, and express their repressed love and self-assertion.

Suppressed Love

Even though Emily Dickinson and Yu Xiuhua have completely different love lives, their poems choose to form themselves into small, fragile objects to show their suppressed love in a repressive environment.

Emily Dickinson's Desire for Love

Dickinson lived in a social milieu where women could at least have a small room of their own. Trapped in her father's house, she was unmarried for life but still longed for passionate love.

Summer for thee, grant I may be
 When Summer days are flown!
 Thy music still, when Whippowil
 And Oriole – are done!
 For thee to bloom, I'll skip the tomb
 And row my blossoms o'er!
 Pray gather me –
 Anemone –
 Thy flower – forevermore! (Dickinson, 2016, p. 40)

Dickinson metamorphoses the speaker's body into "anemone", a kind of herb that has showy flowers. In Greek mythology, the anemone was believed to have sprung from the tears of Aphrodite as she mourned the death of her lover, Adonis. The flower, therefore, serves as a symbol of remembrance of a deceased loved one. Moreover, when this flower appears in the funeral scene, it also represents the meaning of guarding the dead from evil. The bright colors of anemone symbolizes the speaker's passionate love, while the hidden meaning of the flower is her deep attachment to the lover. The words "flown" and "done" hint that the the speaker is separated from her beloved forever. In this light, the speaker manages to "skip the tomb" which is a barrier between her and her lover, and metamorphoses into anemone to bloom next to his tombstone in that accompanying him and guarding him "forevermore". Dickinson expresses her fidelity and enthusiasm for love through the mouth of the speaker. In her other lines, her emotions for the lover are more fervent: "And were You – saved –/ And I – condemned to be/ Where You were not–/ That self – were Hell to me –" (Dickinson, 2016, p. 344).

Just like Hardie's view, the metamorphosis is a narrative element that invites contrasting readings and opens out interpretative possibilities (Hardie, 2006, p. 165). As a matter of fact, Dickinson "insistently described herself as a tiny person, a wren, a daisy, a mouse, a child, a modest little creature easily mastered by circumference and circumstance" (Gilbert & Gubar, 2005, p. 587). The woman transforms herself into a small thing, while the male Other is "the sun", "sunlight" and "burning noon", a powerful and aggressive figure,

which is precisely the aesthetics of Victorian marriage. Since Dickinson read many Victorian works, her romantic poetry inevitably deals with female service modeled at that age (Gilbert & Gubar, 2005, p. 587). By contrasting the different power between the two sexes, the reader can be more aware of the relationship of men and women in Dickinson's time. On the other hand, Dickinson refused to be the model wife in the society of the time and decided to stay in her father's house to remain her independence. Soon, however, she found out such avoidance led instead to another kind of repression—father's authority—and she was excluded “from the passionate drama of adult sexuality” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2005, p. 595). It is noticeable that Dickinson's father plays a central role in the fiction of her life, which implies that she has to suppress her desire for the opposite sex as a normal woman so as to gain her father's approval and maintain a good girl in her father's heart. The metamorphosis of Dickinson and her father—the male Other—contains the fairy-tale elements which neutralize the tragic and distressing in the text, thereby, distancing the reader from the text (Hardie, 2006, p. 164). In this way, although Dickinson does not attack patriarchy in the poetry, the poet's feelings and heart, which were suppressed by her father's authority, are revealed through the metamorphosis images.

Yu Xiuhua's Desire for Love

Unlike Dickinson, Yu Xiuhua once had a married life. Nevertheless, her marriage was decided by her parents to a man who is 13 years older than her. Her husband worked outside all the time, so the couple lacked communication and had a weak emotional foundation. Not only did her husband treat her with indifference, but also acted domestic violence against her. Despite the physical and mental trauma, Yu still yearns for love, but the images of metamorphosis in her poems are more about her helplessness and regret for the love she could not seek.

A Ship with the Leaky Bottom
 History cannot trace the secrets or roots
 With a heavy snowfall omitting the trouble of lies
 Forty years, it was driven back to shallow water again and again by bigger waves
 Playing with fish and shrimp
 It is also good at chasing the wind, the words in the wind, the snake in the cup
 It has only borne two kinds of nothingness
 One is the starry sky that leaks from its body into the lake
 The other is the fish that leaks from outside its body to inside it
 The starry sky is still there, but the fish does not know where it has gone
 Nor does the fish know that he ever came
 Leaving traces in a boat
 ...” (Yu, 2021, p. 43)

In this poem, Yu transforms into “a ship with the leaky bottom”. This broken boat is a metaphor for her disability. Yu was born with cerebral palsy and is unable to speak or move normally. Her mother sought out a fortune teller to find the cause of her disability and he told her that Yu's disability was caused by sins and bad deeds in her past life. Yu herself is confused by this explanation, so she sighed that “history cannot trace the secrets or roots”. For forty years, she cannot sail as far as other normal boats but only stay in shallow waters. The fish that appears in the poem alludes to her lover. In traditional Chinese culture, the fish contains the meaning of love between man and woman. Moreover, the pronoun for fish in the poem is the male “he”. Just as she metamorphoses into a boat, her lover then forms a fish that once stayed with her. Whatsoever, now the

lover is nowhere to be found, and he does not even know that he has had such a great influence on the poet. From this perspective, two kinds of nothingness in her life, one of which is the true love that she cannot find. Li Haiying points out that in the current society “there is a misconception that women with disabilities are undesirable romantic partners, and cultural stereotypes that disabled women are asexual... unattractive, and often removed from the realm of true femininity and feminine beauty” (Li, 2022, p. 73). In an environment where disabled women is oppressed by both sexism and disability discrimination, Yu’s longing for love is in fact hopeless. The metamorphosis in the poem makes the harsh reality into an aesthetic spectacle that compels the reader to refigure the relationship between the poet and the text, their understanding of the narratives it contains, and ultimately how it functions as a literary representation.

Imprisoned Soul

Apart from their desire for love, both poets spend much of their time in a fixed and small space, lacking the opportunity to communicate with the outside world. Their poems reveal their longing for the connection to the outside world in one way or another. The difference lies in that Dickinson seeks comfort from religion and quietly accepts this reclusive life, while Yu Xihua turns to the development of her own internal space and fiercely searches for ways to communicate with the world. In this case, the images of metamorphosis of Dickinson contain more religious meaning. On the other hand, Yu’s images are more involved in the escape of the soul.

Emily Dickinson: “Shut Her in Prison, and She will not Mind”

Dickinson once wrote in her letter to Higginson that she had not cross her father’s ground to any house in town for a long time (Gilbert & Gubar, 2005, p. 593). Remained such a long period of isolation, she also has the expectation of outside contact. “This is my letter to the World / That never wrote to Me” (Dickinson, 2016, p. 254) undoubtedly shows the poet’s sorrow for searching the connection to the world but in vain. Although she “never saw a Moor” or “the Sea” (Dickinson, 2016, p. 532), Dickinson comforted herself that “Captivity is Consciousness, / So’s Liberty” (Dickinson, 2016, p. 327). She found her way to deal with the constraints of small rooms.

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
 In Corners—till a Day
 The Owner passed—identified—
 And carried Me away—
 ...
 And when at Night—Our good Day done—
 I guard My Master’s Head—
 ...
 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, 2016, p. 355)

In this poem, Dickinson describes herself as “a loaded gun” that is held by “the owner”. The owner here alludes to God, since that the gun is under his control. Moreover, she mentions that she has no power to die,

which corresponds to the rule that suicide is not allowed in Calvinism. The whole poem expresses the author's devout belief that She will serve God with all her might before she dies.

But when the vivid Ore
Has vanquished Flame's conditions,
It quivers from the Forge
...
With Hammer, and with Blaze
Until the Designated Light
Repudiate the Forge— (Dickinson, 2016, p. 612)

The poet transforms into a “vivid ore” this time. She has endured the torment from the fire and the furnace until the “designated light” came, then she was saved. It is a typical religious poem, which the poet believed after the purifying flame, her soul will finally reach the heaven. Dickinson sets the scenes in the forest and in the forge, the only place where the gun and the ore can be tested, which are both small area of space, echoing the room she was in. Through these images, the natural world as we all know it becomes a sign of God's will and trials. Just as she wrote in her letter: “(Daisy) she is satisfied - but punish (do not) don't banish her—shut her in prison, Sir... and Daisy will not mind” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2005, p. 605). Trapped in a small room, Dickinson regarded it as the test from God. As long as she could be saved after death, she never minded such imprisoned life.

Yu Xiuhua: “A Crow is Flying Out of the Body”

A crow in a field
Slowly, it comes, and passes by. Never minds the weather
Its body has four seasons: Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter, at this time, the north wind blows strongly
Shame to fly south, shame to be colorful. It is enough to have wings
Life migrating or not migrating shares an equal waste
...
The wind blows once more, and it does not disappear
As if a solid dipping faith under the surface of the water
From the ground to a tree, or from a tree to the ground
She herself first omitted the part that was counted
gender, the lover. Another crow flew over this field
Generated the brief airflow” (Yu, 2021, p. 143)

In the poem, Yu transforms her soul into a “crow”. The crow is strolling idly in the field. It neither needs to migrate south, nor does it have bright colors like other birds. Its body has its own seasons, and it can choose to fly or not to fly on its own will. When other crow flies by, it just jumps between the ground and the branches, forgetting mundane affairs. This poem is a reflection of Yu's life, which the fate has been constantly devastating her, and she is unable to go out to work and see the colorful world like others. She could only walk in the fields of Hengdian, watching others come and go.

As a imagery, the crow appears several times in Yu's poetry. For one thing, the crows are extremely common in the northern countryside. As a female peasant, Yu could see them frequently, thus making it not surprising that they are written in the poems. For another thing, in traditional Chinese culture, people have negative attitude towards the crows because of their miserable cries and presence in graveyards. The poet

chooses such ominous animal as her incarnation in that they are both disliked and misunderstood by others. Because of her disability, she inevitably has to face discrimination from the surroundings. According to Li Haiying, “in a world that favors men over able-bodied people, damaged female bodies are not only seen as shameful and demeaning, but they are also denied hope, opportunity, and meaning” (Li, 2022, p. 72). What’s more, as a peasant who is normally busy with work and household chores, writing poetry is a ridiculous pursue. Thus Yu metamorphosizes herself into the crow since they both share the alike fate, lack of colourful life, but their bodies hold the whole world.

For forty years, she has been trapped in Hengdian, therefore, she cries out in her lines that: “What I can’t do in this life, I will write on the epitaph—let me go, give me freedom” (Yu, 2021, p. 186). Hence, a crow is flying out of her body.

A crow is flying out of the body
 Like a paradox, it flies into the dusk, spinning in the diminishing light
 Once again, the ridges face the illusion of time buried
 Or it could be: the ridges are the illusion of buried time
 So, is a body inhabited by a raven an illusion of a raven?
 All the doubts cannot stop a crow from flying out of the body
 It knows how to fly as well as it knows the ins and outs
 It wants to fly more beautifully, to be feared in an impeccable way
 A crow belongs first to the sky, then to the field
 And then a person who watches it fly by
 ...
 The final question is the body does not know the crow
 The moment of flying back” (Yu, 2021, p. 36)

Again the poet metamorphoses her soul in to the crow. “The dusk” is a symbol of the challenges of life, namely physical disability. Her soul bravely faces these challenges, flying beautifully. Not only does the change of mountains and rivers and the passage of years correspond to each other, but also the body is a counterpart of the soul. So the poet asks whether her body is merely an illusion of the soul. Her soul belongs to the sky, the field and the world. When it finds its freedom, it may never come back. Hardie declares that metamorphosis do not lose the enduring aspects of the subject’s being (Hardie, 2006, p. 171). In two poems, Yu’s soul undergoes metamorphosis, an emphatically process that leaves little possibility of a return to its prior shape but still keep its identity.

Conclusion

Emily Dickinson and Yu Xiuhua, two female poets, though in different times and countries, have experienced similar fates: trapped in one small place, with love and longing for the world in their hearts that they have nowhere else to express. They give vent to their repressed feelings in their poems, and let the world be astonished by their rich inner world. Although Dickinson was unmarried for life, she longed for passionate love; Yu Xihua’s marriage, which existed in name only, left her with a regretful tinge of unrequited love. In their long isolated life, Dickinson sought answers from God and was convinced that everything was just a test from God; Yu Xihua, on the other hand, roars “let me go and give me freedom”, changing her soul soar like a bird. The numerous metamorphoses in their poems undoubtedly show their perceptions of themselves, the

world and life. What's else, their integration of life into poetry, breaking the double bind of female poets. A spinster and an invalid, both of them are unnoticed women at the time. However, their poetry is like Chen Nianxi, a Chinese peasant worker poet, said "Even the lowliest bones have rivers in them. I write, because I have something to say."

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