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LETTER TRADITION AND EPISTOLARY NOVEL IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

In this study, letter writing in other words epistle writing is focused on since it is the first literary form of the prose fiction in American Literature. Being commonly used in eighteenth century, this literary form is viewed as a means for the writers to display their political and social thoughts. Then, it began to be utilized for dealing with the issues on women who cannot give voice to their inner side and also their restricted love affairs as well as their role in the patriarchal society. After the emergence of one of the prose fiction novel, it continues to be used within the sub-genre of the novel, epistolary novel. The present study is generated through literature review method. and the main purpose of it is to depict the aim and use of the letter as a literary device, epistolary tradition and early samples of epistolary novel in American Literature. Achieving this purpose, letter and epistolary tradition and epistolary novel have been handled. As a result, it was seen that letters or epistles have great significance in prose fiction especially for novel that demonstrate the emotions and thoughts of the characters in detail.

Keywords: Letter Tradition, Epistle, Epistolary Novel, American Literature.

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Introduction

Used as a vehicle in America for getting in touch with the people living in distant places in Europe, letter or epistle began to be used in Britain as a literary means in the eighteenth century. Since this different form of writing attracted most of the people in both in Europe and America, the writers in New World influenced by this writing style. The letter or epistles demonstrate both emotions and thoughts of the writers through characters' relations. Thus, the writers focused on any issues that affected the public in new land. At first the issues handled were about politics and then social concepts. Additionally, primary social issues demonstrated in letters writing were on women who did not have any right in many part of the patriarchal society. Even though the first letters were seen as archival document regarded resources of biography or history, the latter ones began to be literary units in composing literature of America. Especially in 19th century, these units showed the social contact of the American society.

In letters of which emergence was seen in 18th century as mentioned, the writers aim at displaying the issue on which they try to deal with in detail by the help of emotional and mental expressions. Doing that sometimes, they give place to reciprocal letter and sometimes the letters that do not have any responses. Whatever method they may be used in literary works, they help the readers to feel intimate to the correspondents. By the way, if the readers cannot see the responses by the addressee, they start to question the unwritten replies. In addition, they demonstrate the conversation ideal to which the people cannot access in any type of discourse.

Letter writing form being the significant way in America mostly during the nineteenth century, turned into one of the prose fiction, novel. This kind of novels that are composed with various letters or epistles are called epistolary novels. These sub-genres are so remarkable in displaying the voices of the society of the time when they are written. Not only are they the means of communication, but also they are the demonstrator of the feelings and events. Additionally, the epistolary novels contribute to the stories being told throughout the work and make them actual and possible. In fact, they imitate real lives. Thus, these literary works present many unforgettable subjects for the readers.

Since the letters or in other words epistles are viewed as the means that create, contribute the development of the prose fiction in American literature, present studies aims at presenting the knowledge on usage of them as literary devices. Therefore, to compose the study the issues of letter tradition in American literature, Epistolary novel and Epistolary Tradition in American Literature have been focused on. As a result, it is emphasized the letters and epistolary form is so significant means for developing the prose fiction. In this respect some prominent epistolary novels are taken into account and placed in the study.

1. Letter Tradition in American Literature

A letter is a written message of somebody and it is written to another one who is viewed as absent. Its purpose is to show one's feelings or to magnify an issue. Prose fiction that turned into the genre novel in 18th century, comprised thanks to lots of proficient writers who tested different kinds of fictional forms including writings on places visited and experiences come across and also biographies. In this evolution, letter in other words epistle is at a substantial place leading to development of prose fiction. A letter helps writers to interrogate any subject, as it is the means of one's sensational and mental side. As Bower states (1997, 3), though literary works can impel our intellectual and sensational understandings and reassessment, to us some of these forms of writing revive reply more easily. Epistolary form is viewed in such forms. Generally, this form is connected to feminist issues. In addition, the letters allow detecting the issues of postmodernism. "The back and forth of letters, their desire for reply, their incomplete ownership of information,



their concomitant play on ideas of absence and presence and their apparently personal and private nature, model an interactive openness" (Bower, 1997, 3).

In literature, letters bring about some responses from the character of the writing, the addressee, outer reader and from the writers who place replies to their respective or another one's letter in their writings. These writers can grant their readers new understandings about what their letter texts mean. As Louw indicates (2015, 5), "The letter has played a part in human connections and communication throughout recorded history." Moreover, letter novel or epistolary novels can display conversations or social intercourse in such an extremely self-conscious way that the readers have the opportunity, to see both past and present connections. Therefore, the letters of these works necessitate some responses and cause the readers to interrogate the responses. As Bower states (1997, 5), "The most distinctive thing about the letter form as a literary device may be that no matter what else it does, it always attempts to elicit or offer a response." Even though letter requires to be written reciprocally, writers write on their own. "The letter becomes a blank space for the expression of one's thoughts and emotions to the absent other in a communicative effort to minimize the separation" (Nelson, 2016, 1).

Writers of the letters tend to compose self and recipient or addressee. Additionally, they review these two issues as they create fictional world and have the strength to do so. Thus, these letter writers' pen are able to use private aggressive and preservative expressions for depicting the character's unsatisfying relationships in more satisfying situations. In these letters especially, women who are usually silent in society, have the opportunity to be free to write self and others again. Therefore, the letters can be so special along with diaries.

In what situation the letter writers may be, that is, they may be suffering or be in restriction during the moment of the writing, nevertheless they can control their pen and express whatever they want to mean in discourse. Generally, every letter writer question similar issues such as public discourse contrary to private discourse in some extent. In this context, letters are viewed as different explanations of argumentative essays and they have some implications to the responses on gender in writing. In addition, the letters can demonstrate the insufficient sides of the society in an effective way. Letters have contribution to the development of the novel. By the way, many scholars connect the letters to the literary forms, which disregard epistolary form including playful, postmodern probabilities.

Since viewed as archival documents, the letters have never been neglected. They were the main resources of history and biography that cover knowledge on people. These informative texts had been taken into consideration and turned into a fictional world in artificiality. In this fictional world, the epistolary expressions had the opportunity to show the sincerity and closeness that might be absent in face-to-face conversations. Therefore, epistolary texts helped the readers to see and emphasize with various sides of human experiences. As Louw indicates (2015, 5), "the first fictional letters were written by a man speaking as a woman and that the letter form was deemed an appropriate vehicle for representing the female voice."

As Stern states (1997, 17), "The letter form bridges the acoustic and the textual, creating dialectic of voice against vision." Letter form of writing contributes the writers for showing themselves in their playful writing in the midst of their sadness, displaying the heroic, behaviors and expecting novel usually offers quite plan and clear subjectivity since its writer obviously writes down what he/she is thinking during writing. Ideas and emotions are not so direct and obvious in this writing genre as one assumes. On the contrary, the writer investigates intelligence among characters' minds. The letter is the means of subjectivity of writers' mind since it includes a story about any event in consciousness.

The letter was assumed as the main means for social contact in American literature in nineteenth century. In addition, it was accepted as a representative genre in which the writers including Ralph Waldo Emerson, John de Crevecoeur, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman were able to handle both social and political themes



having great importance in their own literary works. Therefore, most of the significant American writers tended to compose their works with the form of epistolary as a prime genre by the help of which they could demonstrate the debates on democracy prior to the Civil War. These writers questioned the social contact in terms of political thoughts by way of correspondence practices and analyses.

The epistolary writing has come in view with Richardson's novel. This writing style later influenced the writers of the American literature and they began to write in letter form. Not only did Richardson bequest seduction as a theme, but he also bequeath how to present the story in epistolary writing. "The vogue of epistolary fiction in England, begun by *Pamela* in 1740 reached its peak in 1788, the year before the appearance of *The Power of Sympathy*" (Brown, 1940, 52). Richardson's fictional characters, Pamela and Clarissa were also letter writers. By the way, his epistolary novels that became famous in America deliberately included the Christian names.

In fact, the epistolary writing did not come forth in America, yet this writing form affected the writers of New World. As Decker states (1998, 10), "It would be difficult and purposeless to argue that there arise distinctively "American" epistolary modes." Actually, United States caused the writers to live away from their friends and family members and this situation was the reason of widespread experience of literary writing. Some of the writers brought different nature and experience to case of writing and getting letter. Moreover, they tried composing their works writing the contexts affected by variety and variability of different culture. Among these writers Adams, Dickinson and Emerson composed and wrote epistolary works.

The epistolary writing started by Emerson who stated that he was actually an unwilling letter writer. Contrary to this fact, his epistolary works was viewed as significant achievements since they demonstrated conversation ideals that cannot be accessed in any kind of discourse of his time. As Decker states (1998, 12), "His pursuit of such ideals reflects his disaffection from the political and economic culture of antebellum New England while his later falling-off as a letter writer signals alterations in his friendships and measures his general decline as an author." In addition, another prominent epistolary writer Dickinson displayed success as his letters and poems on writing letters had matchless theoretic comprehension on sending and getting letters. On the other hand, Adams's letter works consisted of correspondences of his distinguished family, the samples of Augustan and annals of frustration, discontent and loss. In his letter, writing the limitations of public and private, politic and personal was confused. As Decker states (1998, 12), three of these significant epistolary writers "share a regional culture and each may be said to exhibit traits of a post-Calvinist "New England Mind." Yet with such common ground they serve all the more to demonstrate the genre's diverse aspect and multifaceted life."

Some regional events caused epistolary writing in America. During the nineteenth century, the people in that country were required to be epistle writers. Indeed, they struggled to pass one reach across the distances by help of travelers and to contact with the people who were away from them. As Deckers states (1998, 88), "Such communications are more or less self-reflexive, yet even the most ostensibly naïve letter writing demonstrates complex strategies of relating experience and preserving bonds." In fact, these writers were affected from the letter writer writers of Britain, so they were dilettante. To American letter writers, their letters were not to become very long or very short. In fact, these writers tried to demonstrate the genre of epistolary by combining them with other forms of writing. To them the letters should not bore the people but they could be long discourse and their work should include effective content. As the letters were the ways of communication, they would display interpersonal relations.

Actually, the novel emerged as a new form of literary genre in the 18th century in England. The epistolary novel that is one of the sub-genre of this form of writing consisted of series of letters that were composed generally by the main character. The emotions and events demonstrated by the help of this character help reader to feel intimate as the letters are written at the centre of the action. This fact supports the writer to use different points of view in epistolary novel. Some



significant American letters are Betty Hester, James Osgood, Edward Thomson and Clare Purcell. To these writers, letters in other words epistles are sent to a person or people. This form of writing contributes to the story for making it more real and probable. The reason of this issue is that it imitates real life. Epistolary works have provided many unforgettable issues in recent literary works. Contrary to the modern letter, the epistles generally demonstrate the writer at the beginning of the novel and then it places the recipient. The composer of it is put forth at the end of the epistle. Perhaps, the carrier is also depicted. Indeed, the epistolary novel consists of lots of documents. *The History of Emily Montague* (1769) was the first epistolary novel written by Frances Brooke.

2. Epistolary Novel

The word "epistle" is the basis of the word epistolary. An epistolary novel is viewed as a literary work that includes ranges of epistles or letters or documents written by one or more characters. Indeed, it comprises the epistles being exchanged among the characters. "Epistolary novels replicate the authenticity of actual letters and re-create a supposedly intimate private realm for the reader to observe other lives" (Nelson, 2016, 1). This novel enables readers to enter into the life of the character by the help of correspondence. In contemporary literature, there is decrease in writing of this genre. Actually, epistolary writing was so famous in the eighteenth century, fell into disuse in the later century and became rare in twentieth century. In 18th century, use of this novel increased and it provided the readers to understand and share the thoughts, feelings and dilemmas of the ordinary people. Therefore, social matters took attention of the readers. As Cook states (1996, 12), "The eighteenth-century epistolary novel played an important part in the reconfiguration and redefinition of concepts of private and public, for it represents the paradoxical intersection of these apparently opposed orders." In addition, the characters of the epistolary novel were regarded as self-governing. Most of the American writers considered this form of writing as a perfect genre by the help of which they could demonstrate the atmosphere before Civil War in American democracy. In fact, through these novels including epistles, writers enabled to reveal the political and social relations in new culture. Moreover, as Lukic states (2018, 2), "In its eighteenth-century heyday, the epistolary novel tended to include multiple first-person narrators, which granted the editor the advantage of having belated access to the other letter writers' perspective."

As El-Hindi states (2016, 158), "The epistolary novel or novel in letters was virtually unknown as a literary genre before Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-8), which came later, but is considered the greatest and most extended novel in the epistolary form." The mission and cultural sense of epistolary novels changed in early American fiction works. Even though they were so famous in late 18th and early 19th centuries, the works of American writers varied from the works written in Britain. American writers make use of the uncertainties peculiar to the form of epistolary and utilize the epistles to confuse and upset the stability of the narrative of national situation depicting documents on politics and famous speech forms. Therefore, epistles or letters were seen as ways of showing political, cultural and of course social revolt. Actually, those epistles were handwritten. By the way, "When the novel of letters first appeared, the letter was filling a psychological function that the plain prose narrative had not yet developed any adequate techniques for" (Jorgensen, 2011, 20).

The epistolary novels emerging in American literature in eighteenth century includes works such as *The Power of Sympathy* and *The Coquette*. Both of these works displayed the epistolary connections portraying social issues. Contrary to print, the letter being handwritten realized to concrete its writer's moral side. In addition, founders of America use epistolary form and in early nineteenth century this writing style used in order to strengthen America's power and split from European countries. By the way, "The eighteenth century epistolary novel can be considered for the most part, the female's novel since it focuses mainly on the emotional aspects of the female



protagonist as well as on the cross-gender relationships which were then considered taboo" (El-Hindi, 2016, 158).

In modern period, epistolary novel is absolutely a possible literary form. Even though this form is composed from a series of epistles or letters that are regarded as different materials, it has unity and consistency as a whole. "The epistolary structure does not inherently involve a close proximity between narration and events, but the form is certainly conducive to the creation of immediacy" (Sandefur, 2003, 83). Additionally, involvement of epistolary novel with modern novel is mentioned today since women try this form since they tend to use it for expressing and reminding their lives. Most of the epistolary works focus writing letters since women regard them as a way to reflect them in their writings and these who are correspondents. Thus, this form is thought to be a kind of mirror.

Epistolary novel is sentimental and obviously subjective. It displays inland and consciousness to the certain likeable listener. Though epistolary writing resembles stream of consciousness writing, the reader of it knows that in its borders another reader exists. Therefore, this issue differ this form from stream-of-consciousness writing. Especially women use the epistles to examine themselves as they utilize their consciousness in this writing in which they are so independent and free to express what they cannot tell when the addressee is present. Traditionally, epistolary letters are the writings that are never sent. Therefore, the writers begin to find themselves in the analysis of themselves. In addition, as Nelson states (2016, 1), "The confidentiality of letters engages the reader in a vicarious and voyeuristic identification with the inner life of another person."

Most of these novels have dealt with the issues such as love or seduction. The first samples of this form include letters on love and they do not have any response. Later, the exchange of letter is also seen and this kind often has seduction story. On the contrary, in modern novels by women, there are another issues rather than love. In most of them women writers search for their own identity. By the way, as Ngom indicates (2018, 1) "as a healing process, letter-writing is an exercise in trust that traverses the distances between the addresser and the addressee."

3. Epistolary Tradition in American Literature

One of the prominent writers of American literature, Charles Dickens's novel *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) includes correspondence to show the events flow. Even though this work is not regarded as epistolary novel, its letters help providing the development of narrative in the novel. However, *The Coquette* (1797) that is written by Hannah Foster is an epistolary novel. This novel depends on a real event and portrays a woman who is seduced, left and delivers a child at a public house. The writer tells the story from the point of view of this woman character. This work regarded as the first novel that is written by a native-born American woman. It becomes the most famous work in England in 19th century.

Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* is another epistolary American novel. It consists of a sequence of letters. "The female epistolary bod is made powerful simply because of the communication form: women are allowed to "speak freely when writing" (Ramsey, 2016, 29). The writer's use of letters makes it more real. In fact, the reader thinks that the characters, who write letter to each other in this novel, are real in life. Thus, this feature helps the readers to feel intimate to those characters. As Sandefur states (2003, 86), "The epistolary structure, with its reliance on both absence and presence, suits well Walker's portrayal of female self-actualization, a process that involves finding and asserting an independent voice while maintaining connections." Walker's work presents the voice of a poor Afro-American woman and consciousness of an uneducated character. As Jorgensen indicates (2011, 7), "*The Color Purple* is a novel in which the language of the letters look so much like spoken language that the reader is easily duped into believing that she is hearing the voice of the narrator rather than reading her writing."



Another letter writer is a French-American writer Michel Guilloume Jean de Crevecoeur. His main concern in his letters was lives in colonies and American society emergence. He publishes the work *Letters from an American Farmer* in 1782. He is regarded as the first writer who show the American lives, American Dream and American society to the European people. Therefore, this work is viewed as the means that helps the Europeans to get information on New World. In addition, this work deals with American openness and lifestyle and religious, cultural and ethnic variety that bring the Americans together. Crevecoeur depicts an ideal version of an independent society in America. He also describes slavery in throughout the work. The writer publish second version of this work and rewritten in French.

In 1980, Henry Adams also published *John Hay's letters and diary*. Likewise, the poet Emily Dickinson published some letters along with her poems both of which help the readers to feel intimate. As Rosevere indicates (2000, 70), "in...letters Dickinson has transformed the possibilities of form and content, creating a fiction which appears startlingly like reality." In addition, another American poet, Walt Whitman is considered as a letter writer. One of the American letter writer is Hazel Elizabeth Betty Hester living during the twentieth century. Being a correspondent, she wrote many short stories philosophical treatises, diaries and poems but they weren't published. She is known for long term correspondence with Flannery O'Connor who is a fiction writer. Some of the letters who is a fiction writer. Some of these letters are published in Sally Fitzgerald's *The Habit of Being* in 1979. Hester did not permit the writer to show her presence in this work. Another American writer who is seen as letter writer is William Cullen Bryant. His work is called *Letters of a Traveller*, which deals with different times and different countries.

Some of the other American letter works are *On the Edge of the War Zone* by Mildred Aldrich, *A senses of Letters in Defense of Divine Revelation in Reply to Rev* by Hosea Ballou, *Letters of Franklin Lane* by Franklin Lane, *Adventures and Letters* by Richard Harding Davis, *Lincoln Letters* by Abraham Lincoln, *Recollection and Letters of General Robert E.* by General Robert E. Lee, *Army Letters from an Officer's Wife* by Frances Roe, *Letters of Samuel F. B. Morse* by Samuel Morse, *Complete Letters of Mark Twain* by Mark Twain, *Letters to His Children* by Theodore Roosevelt.

Conclusion

A letter is the prose message of writer's mind. The literary genre of fiction novel evolved in early eighteenth century. Epistle or letter is a significant writing in the development of prose fiction. Thus, it helped the evolution of the genre, novel. The letters having special properties allow the writers examining postmodern issues. Writers of them try to constitute and review self and addressee. In addition, the letter writers have the opportunity to control the discourse in the works.

Although correspondence is viewed as resource for biography and history, it is indeed a remarkable genre by the help of which early writers of America made use for politics and social relations in new culture and nation. The most significant type of letter writing is epistolary form emerging with the British writer, Samuel Richardson. Then this writing type affected some of writers in America. In this form sometimes the addresser and addressee is absent. The subjectivity lie within this writing.

Being one of the earliest types of the novel letter or epistolary form permits the readers entering into the world of the characters. It displays different points of views. Although epistle or letter was popular in the eighteenth century, it was not present in nineteenth century but came in sight in twentieth century. Since they dealt with ordinary people's lives, the letters were famous in eighteenth century. The cultural side and function of epistolary writing changed in early American fiction. During those years, especially women and their lives were aimed to be demonstrated. At first the issue of love was handled in these works that did not include replies, then an exchange of letters between lovers were seen.



Epistolary form that is a significant means especially during the nineteenth century in America, took part in prose fiction that includes novel. Consisting of different and many letters or epistles, this novel genre is called epistolary novel. This sub-genre is so substantial in demonstrating the communication of the society of its time when the writer composes it. Thus, it places both emotions of the characters events occur in the plot. To conclude, the epistolary novels contribute to the stories of the literary works and display them as real and probable. Actually, they reflect reality. Thus, these works presenting some unforgettable issues for the readers are regarded as significant means for contribution to the prose fiction in American literature.

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