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## The Genre of Epistles in Literature



**Dr. Jeyashree G**  
Vice Principal,  
Dr. Ambedkar College,  
Wadala, Mumbai, India

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### Abstract:

William Wordsworth defines, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility". Poets psyche appeals to emotions and feelings. This overflow of emotions and feelings are channelized through different forms and epistolary poems are one of the genres used by the poets. The paper deals with the history epistolary poems in Literature. The paper explores the origin of epistolary poems referring to great Roman Poets Ovid, Homer and further attempts to contextualize the form and motif of epistolary poetry. The paper further analyses the milieu of the epistolary poems reflecting the ideologies and mindset of people attuned to socio cultural environment of the contemporary period.

**Key words:** epistolary, ideologies, epistolary poetry.

### Introduction:

Epistolary poems are one of the ancient forms in literature which could be traced in Greek and Roman literature. An epistolary poem is written in a form of letter addressed to an individual or to a society. The term *epistle* is derived from the Latin term *Epistula* which means a letter. Poets present their poems in the form of letters appealing to emotions and feelings. Epistolary poems may be objective or subjective, formal or colloquial, directed to an individual or to a general public. It may take any form from heroic couplets to blank verse. While exploring the origin of epistolary form in poetry, the scholars could peg varied themes being dealt in the poems, from Philosophical concepts to daily mundane activities.

Letters is a powerful medium that brings people together. Philosophers, sociologists, literary writers widely use the form of epistles to drive home their views and ideas effectively. Exploring the origin of epistolary poems lucidly illumines the fact that poets effuse their

thoughts through epistles effectively. Epistolary poems are penned for pedagogical purpose also. The poems of epistles can be objective registering distant views pertaining to social issues or subjective imparting personal feelings and emotions of the writer.

Origin of epistolary poems could be traced back to Roman Literature between 43 B.C to 17 or 18 A.D when the great Roman poet Ovid wrote *Heroides (The Heroines) or Epistulae Heroidum (letters of Heroines)* comprising of fifteen epistolary poems depicting the aggrieved heroines of Greek and Roman Mythology who had been in some way neglected and abandoned by their lovers. Epistles are considered to be the best form to channelize the feelings and emotions of the writers especially in love poems.

The quotation cited below is pegged from the opening elegiac couplets of Ovid's poem *Epistulae Heroidum (letters of Heroines)* when Penelope writes to her husband Odysseus, (translated version into English) the hero of the Trojan War, yearning for his long absence and wishes him to return soon,

This your Penelope sends to you, too-slow Ulysses;  
A letter in return does me no good; come yourself!

The opening of the second poem written in elegiac couplets thus reads,

Phyllis to Demophoon

Phyllis, your Thracian friend, complains to you, Demophoon,  
for being absent beyond your promised time.

When the moon's horns had touched once more, at the full,  
you agreed to anchor by our shores.

Four times the moon has hidden, four times waxed to the full,  
without the Thracian sea bringing Athenian ships.

The above cited epistolary poems depict the loneliness of the heroines anxiously anticipating the arrival of their heroes. These poems also simply state the fact that women are more emotional than men. The poems reveal the intense emotions of the heroines pining for their lovers' absence and the heroes being proceeded to duly perform their duty towards their family and country. The poems present the battle between emotions and intelligence. These poems implicitly establish the hierarchy of man/woman in the society. Man's responsibility and role in the society and Woman's emotional dependence on man, dichotomy of Intelligent quotient (EQ) and Emotional Quotient (IQ), the former being rational and latter being emotional are projected.

The poet also lucidly illuminates the fact that the emotions and feelings of the heroines could be imparted effectively only through the form of epistles where the presence of the absent is felt. The motif of love is being dealt appealing to the emotions of the readers. Ovid's *Double Heroides* is the sequel of *Heroides (The Heroines)*, comprising of fifteen epistolary poems dealing with the six epistles exchanged between three pairs of lovers. The subject of love and war is the milieu of Ovid's epistolary poems.

Horace is the contemporary poet of Ovid and his *Epistles* are addressed to his friends and acquaintances. His *Epistles* are translated into English by scholars of English literature and *David Ferry*, a recipient of the Harold Morton Landon Translation Award, is one of the scholars who have translated it into English. While perusing his *Epistles*, the readers would feel that they are intercepting the conversation between two individuals. Horace *Epistles* are real but open letters meant for public reading. His *Epistles* are presented in conversational style with digressions and meandering effects. The beginning of his letter to *Vinius Asina*,

Just as I've told you over and over, Vinny,  
 Deliver these books of mine to Augustus only  
 If you know for sure that he's in good health and only  
 If you know for sure that he's in a good mood and only  
 If it comes about that he asks in person to see it.

The epistle is addressed to *Vinius Asina* who has been called *Vinny* in the poem lucidly reveals the familiarity between writer and reader. The poem is written in conversational style discussing social issues. Ovid's epistolary poems are poetic fictional letters with romantic tint whereas Horace's *Epistles* are anchored on realistic ground discussing contemporary social issues. The motif of the epistolary poems produced in the successive years complement the socio economic environment of the contemporary period.

**Epistolary poems in English literature:** The influence of Horace and Ovid can be traced in English epistolary poems. Samuel Daniel introduced the form epistle in Poetry in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Alexander Pope used this form in his *epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* addressing to his friend John Arbuthnot, a physician who was dying. Pope wrote this poem as a memorial of their friendship. Nevertheless, the poem is autobiographical and satirical through which he directly attacks his opponents and rivals of his career. He pin points the debauched sycophants, hypocritical and insipid critics of his age and observes, *No place is sacred, not even church is free*. He duly acknowledges the influence of the great poet Horace, *I cough like Horace and tho'lean, am short*; the poem caricatures the contemporaries of Pope like Addison who has been criticized that his jealousy and fear erodes his talent. The character sketches of *Atticus* and *Sporus* implicitly refer to Joseph Addison and John Hervey respectively. Although this poem had been rejected by a contemporary critic as *mere lampoon*, this verse poetry has been considered as one of the striking best works of Pope. Poems written in form of epistles assert the freedom of writers and Pope prudently has chosen the medium of epistle to impart his views effectively.

The literature of Augustan age reflects social issues of the contemporary period and poets record their perceptions through their works. The writings of 18<sup>th</sup> century are both, subjective

or objective and there is a blurred boundary to categorize if a poem is addressed to a particular individual or to the general public. Poems are written in the form epistles expressing and effusing the thoughts of the writers which were circulated among the friends and known circles but also came under the purview of the unknown readers. This paved way for the promotion of literary works. Exchange of ideas among scholars in common place like coffee houses further motivated the writers to register their views in their works and Alexander Pope's *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* exemplifies the significance of epistolary poems in literature.

**Epistolary poems of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century** depict the society synchronized with technology. Technological progress transformed the mindset and culture of the people. Epistolary poem written during this period reveal a drastic transformation in the perception of people. Literature reflects the contemporary society and epistolary poems are not exceptions. Poems and other genres of literature in the past had been relished with zeal and enthusiasm as they promote aesthetic sense in the society. Nevertheless many writers in their works had exposed the hurdles of artists in their respective works. Today in the digital age, materialistic growth is more important. Joseph Harrison in his *Three Horatian Epistles* vividly exposes the perceptions pertaining to culture and society through the poems written in form of epistles. This reveals the fact that the epistles are the comfortable medium to the poets for the exchange of their ideas. Joseph Harrison's epistolary poem addressed to *Virginia Fairfax* further demonstrates the poet's attempt to register his views on the consideration of pursuing a career of a poet. The poem begins with the direct address to the recipient, Virginia Fairfax conforming the formalities of general letter writing, *My dear Virginia, thank you for your letter! I'm doing fine, the weather is pleasant here.....*

The poet's further expounds the advantages and disadvantages of being a poet. He dubiously questions the recipient of the poetry whose daughter wishes to become a poet, if writing poetry is a good career, *Is poetry, as you put it, "a good career,"/ And would it be a good career for her?* Though the poem is addressed an individual, it is a common question to the budding aspiring poets. He puts onus on what one wants in his/her life. The battle between two **P's** that **Passion** and **Practicality** is speculated in the poem. If one follows his/her passions then practically he/she may not be successful. The former is closely allied to Emotional Quotient (EQ) and latter is allied to Intelligent Quotient. Choosing a career of one's own interest may gratify one's passions but from practical point of view, material success has become the parameter of measuring one's ability. The poem also states that children should be given freedom to choose their own career. Apparently the motif of the poem is common for all parents who are anxiously anticipating their children's success in their respective careers. But many a time they fail to recognize the hidden talents of their own children and subject them to pressure. The poet in his epistle advises, *So beware what you tell your children not to do, /Since they will probably go and do it,/And it could be they actually know what's best for them.*

**Conclusion:** Epistolary poems are one of the ancient genres in literature adopted by the poets to express their thoughts lucidly and effectively. While analyzing the reason of the poets resorting to verse poems, the readers could realize the fact that letters are the most comfortable medium to share one's thoughts and views. Ovid's *Heroides (The Heroines) or Epistulae Heroidum (letters of Heroines)* is presented in romantic settings and the personal perceptions of the poet are not recorded but Horace's *Epistles* are subjective, presented in realistic settings dealing with genuine issues. Ovid and Horace are the pioneers of the epistolary poems and every age has produced great poets effusing their thoughts through this powerful genre. Though these poems appear to be simple, they are certainly thought provoking revealing the socio cultural environment of contemporary period. Exploring the nuances of epistolary poems is one of the engaging fields for the research scholars to unearth inexhaustible interpretations from the source text.

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