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LETTER WRITING AS ALLEGORY FOR THE WOMAN WRITER

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the functional aspects of letters, arguing that the epistolary form was appropriated for an increasing variety of uses. It also charts women's growing familiarity with letter-writing practices. The chapter begins by looking at the conveying of news in women's correspondence and the ways in which letters performed social courtesies.

KEYWORDS

Letter-writing, literary device, epistolary fiction, woman writing, female, allegory, a contemporary allegory, female creativity, feminization, epistolary discourse.

INTRODUCTION

A few centuries ago, letter-writing was the only means of communication of people who live in far away places and different countries. If we look into the ancient

history of literature, letter-writing plays a major role in communicating people. Although diary writing is another mode of expression one's experiences, it is not

for communication. Diary is about self and it is a record of the important events that took place in the life of an individual. Letter-writing varies in its kind. There are personal letter, official letter and business letter. These letters express different matters ,experience, needs and aim of life. The pattern or the method of writing too differs from one type of letter to another type of letter. Personal letter is written to the known person in an informal manner whereas the official and business letters are more formal. They are written to the people who are not known or who are officially known. Whatever the letter is, Letter-writing is a part of literature. It requires a command over language and fluency in it. A good letter comes out of one's good language and writing skills.

The figure of the woman letter writer can be seen as an emblem of changing cultural notions of both sexuality and textuality, since the 1980s women's epistolary fiction is not only a site of resistance, but an allegory for the literary woman writer. By proposing the letter as "an allegory for the woman artist" I wish to convey a symbolic reading of the creative act—not that allegories may be read into the plots or that the texts here analyzed are manifestations of allegories. By means of the figure of woman-as-letter-writer, the texts encapsulate a new truth about the woman writer. If traditional epistolary fiction generated by men was a reflection of women's imprisonment, contemporary women writers tell a different story in

that they use letter fiction to seek self-definition. It is important to retain the concept of allegory as a literary device, because we need to acknowledge that the woman writing a letter at her desk is a demonstrative form of representing contemporary female epistolographers in an extended metaphor. In other words, it is not limited to the fictional letter writer; it extends to the historical author, suggesting that the pictorial instance of a woman writing a letter has a connection to a reality underlying its rhetorical or fictional uses. Thus, the letter embodies the epistolographer and becomes an allegoric form of communication. As a contemporary allegory of the woman artist, the letter also tells a less private story than modern allegories. This shift in contemporary allegory still points to letters as a symbolic representation of the creative act, and has therefore a public dimension that, as we shall see, contemporary women authors explore in novel ways that empower their narratives.

In her discussion of how restraints on gender and sexuality may lead to textual

resistance and subversive writing, Kay Turner suggests that letter-writing has the

potential to disrupt any conventional boundary for literary expression because it is linked to the general history of women's constraint under patriarchy. Amorous letterwriting has for centuries been

trivialized as a woman's art while elevated to an art for when authorized by a male writer. Letter-writing became a site of self-invention for women; on the page they expressed a version of the self in excess of what was considered 'appropriately female' in a male world, or as Benstock expresses in *Textualizing the Feminine: On the Limits of Genre* (1991), letter-writing became a site for thinking about the potential subversiveness of women's letters as "they attempt to create an image of self and are the effect of such an effort". As previously mentioned, for Benstock letters as a "private" form of writing, have the potential to disrupt conventional boundaries for fixed identity and desire, revealing the idiosyncratic self-interpretation of the individual letter-writer.

A fictional text represents the individual's self-interpretation at the interface of writer's life experiences of the physical, cultural, or social. Texts, as "man-made products," regardless if they are works of fiction, are invaluable means for examining and communicating human matters. Susan Lanser's *The Narrative Act* (1981) confirms that a text "is essentially ideological as well as aesthetic, for the act of writing, indeed the act of using language, is defined, constrained and conventionalized according to a system of values, norms, and perceptions of the world". Writing subjects make sense of the world around them by interpreting their cultural situations and experiences, creating scenarios for themselves

and others to easily imagine in their reading and expanding their perception of the world and themselves.

Sherry Benstock confirms the idea of letter writing as emblem for the woman artist. She shows that, in the historical context and development of the genre, women were "separated from male enterprise and worldly activity" but "women established links with others through correspondence; they represented themselves through the written word and substituted the act of writing for the action of living, finding in the blank page the occasion to create an ideal version of themselves". This being the case, women's epistolary writing seems to represent a trope of their selves as having been historically linked to an amorous heterosexual discourse where "everything that is related to the image of the beloved" [becomes] "the repository of all identity and desire" (Linda Kauffmann).

The historical trajectory of women's letters and the fictionalization of their letter writing have led to the feminization of the genre, but at the expense of women's artistic originality. Benstock observes that "the exchange of women's letters for a literary genre based on women's letters, initiates a series of substitutions, including the appropriation of female creativity under the guise of heterosexual desire". The idea that female's literariness materialized through letter-writing, which then becomes a genre of

“absolute rigid law,” that limits women’s artistic visibility, is precisely what the contemporary woman artist challenges in her literary self-portrait. If historically letters have been made to serve the law of the genre, how do women writers transgress epistolary generic laws in order to not only debunk “the generic claims’ of amorous epistolary discourse,” (Turner) but to make a statement about their artistic creativity? Monteserrat Abumalham’s short epistolary novel is a case in point for how women artistically deconstruct amorous epistolary discourse in order to defy fixed literary binaries between men’s and women’s writing.

CONCLUSION

Letters were penned in dining rooms, parlours and closets, by firesides, and on desks and laps. In their letters, women projected images of themselves scribbling epistles to friends in order to maintain their mental intimacy. Space was both real and imagined and the physical realities of a hand-written and hand-delivered letter gave way to the imaginative possibilities brought by networks of epistolary exchange and the alternative spaces of creative thought. By reinstating the home more fully in the history of female intellectual experience, a more nuanced view of the domestic arena can be developed : one that sees the home not as a site of exclusion and confinement, but as a space for scholarship and exchange.

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