TOPIC FOR B.A (English Hons.) Part-I ; Paper-I

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INTRODUCTION

The word epistolary comes from the Latin word epistola, meaning a letter.

When a novel is composed entirely of letters, diary entries, or these days even emails or blog posts, it is known as an epistolary novel.

Thus, epistolary form can add greater realism to a story, because it mimics the workings of real life. It is thus able to demonstrate differing points of view without recourse to the device of an omniscient narrator. An important strategic device in the epistolary novel for creating the impression of authenticity of the letters is the fictional editor.

The most famous authors of epistolary novels include Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Jane Austen also experimented with an entirely epistolary form in her early days.
History of Development

The first truly epistolary novel, the Spanish "Prison of Love" (Cárcel de amor) (c1485) by Diego de San Pedro, belongs to a tradition of novels in which a large number of inserted letters already dominated the narrative.

The founder of the epistolary novel in English is said by many to be James Howell (1594–1666) with "Familiar Letters" (1645–50), who writes of prison, foreign adventure, and the love of women.

The first novel to expose the complex play that the genre allows was Aphra Behn's Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister, which appeared in three volumes in 1684, 1685, and 1687.

In the 18th century, the epistolary novel as a genre became popular in the works of such authors as Samuel Richardson, with his immensely successful novels Pamela (1740) and Clarissa (1749). In Germany, there was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774) and Friedrich Hölderlin's Hyperion. The first Canadian novel, The History of Emily Montague (1769) by Frances Brooke, and twenty years later the first American novel, The Power of Sympathy (1789) by William Hill Brown, were both written in epistolary form.
History of Development

Starting in the 18th century, the epistolary form was subject to much ridicule, resulting in a number of savage burlesques. The most notable example of these was Henry Fielding's Shamela (1741), written as a parody of Pamela.

In the late 18th century, the epistolary novel slowly fell out of use.

The epistolary form nonetheless saw continued use, surviving in exceptions or in fragments in nineteenth-century novels. Mary Shelley employs the epistolary form in her novel Frankenstein (1818).

In the 20th century, Kathrine Taylor's Address Unknown (1938) is an anti-Nazi novel in which the final letter is returned marked "Address Unknown", indicating the disappearance of the German character.

Virginia Woolf used the epistolary form for her feminist essay Three Guineas (1938).

Saul Bellow's novel Herzog (1964) is largely written in letter format.

Types of Epistolary Novel

Epistolary novels can be monologic, which means they focus exclusively on the letters or diary entries of one character. The Perks of Being a Wallflower, penned by American novelist Stephen Chbosky, is a good example of a modern monologic epistolary novel, because it consists entirely of the main character’s letters to an anonymous recipient.

Epistolary novels can also be dialogic, consisting of correspondence between two characters, or polylogic, where multiple characters are represented. Les Liaisons dangereuses, written by French author Choderlos de Laclos, is a strong example of polylogic epistolary writing, because the alternating letters work well with the mood of the novel. They let the reader wonder who to trust, and they create an air of gossip and mystery.
Characteristics of Epistolary Novel

- It adds greater realism to a story.
- It includes multiple narrators instead of an omniscient narrator.
- The story can be told and interpreted from numerous viewpoints.
- The subjective points of view makes it the forerunner of the modern psychological novel.
The Advantages of Epistolary Novel

- Evoking a certain dramatic mood is only one of the reasons why authors might use letters or diary entries in their novels. The most obvious benefit is character development, and allowing your protagonist or supporting cast to have their own distinct voices and individual ways of looking at the world.

- It presents an intimate view of the character’s thoughts and feelings without interference from the author and that it conveys the shape of events to come with dramatic immediacy. Also, the presentation of events from several points of view lends the story dimension and verisimilitude.

- Though the method was most often a vehicle for sentimental novels, it was not limited to them. Of the outstanding examples of the form, Richardson’s Clarissa (1748) has tragic intensity, Tobias Smollett’s Humphry Clinker (1771) is a picaresque comedy and social commentary, and Fanny Burney’s Evelina (1778) is a novel of manners.

- Reading a novel in epistolary form can be much more fun and engaging than sticking with a single, omniscient narrator. Of course, it’s also a challenge. Maintaining your dramatic structure or making the chronology of your novel clear while using only letters can be really difficult, which is why many famous authors have written in only partial epistolary form.
The Disadvantages of Epistolary Novel

- Dependent on the letter, writer’s need to “confess” to virtue, vice, or powerlessness, such confessions were susceptible to suspicion or ridicule. The servant girl Pamela’s remarkable literary powers and her propensity for writing on all occasions were cruelly burlesqued in Henry Fielding’s Shamela (1741).
- The problem with epistolary novels is that the POV (point of view) is limited to what the letter-writer sees and knows. Jane Austen wrote “Sense and Sensibility” as an epistolary novel, but later changed it to close third POV. She was better able to show the thoughts of others, for example, what Eleanor’s brother and sister-in-law were thinking. Epistolary novels can be done, but they are challenging for that reason.
- Hard to detail action and dialogue.
- Writers who use it sometimes include things in the correspondence that are normally not included because they want the reader to see something. Then it won’t feel like real letters anymore
- The readers can’t have immediacy because everything is contained in letters. So they are only reading a character’s description or telling of what has already happened.
CONCLUSION

The epistolary novel is a prominent form among modern fictions. Its history reaches back to classical literature, taking special inspiration from the separate traditions of the Roman letter writers Cicero and Pliny, and of Ovid’s Heroides, a series of verse letters celebrating famous heroines of myth. Indeed, several epistolary novels of note have appeared since Letters was published in 1979. Alice Walker’s Pulitzer Prize-winning The Color Purple (1982) is perhaps the best-known example, told through the diary and letters of the protagonist, Celie, who grows from an abused teenager to a confident and empowered woman. Canadian author Richard B. Wright used the form in Clara Callan (2001), about a woman in Ontario, Canada, in the 1930’s. The epistolary form is extremely popular till date.
THANK YOU!