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Technique as Exploration of the Psyche: A Study of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Pearl S. Buck's *Letter from Peking*

Ms. P. Geetha

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jansons Institute of Technology,
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

Technique is the mode by which the writer's experience forming the subject matter is unraveled. In the views of Mark Schorer, "Technique is the means of discovering, exploring, developing, and conveying its meaning, and finally evaluating it" (Stevick 66). Technique enriches our comprehension of the world of action. It not only objectifies the materials of art but also evaluates it. Both Alice Walker and Pearl S. Buck unravel the psyche of the protagonists through the effective means of the technique. In both the novels there is an effective presentation of letters, dreams, first person narration, internal monologues, flashback technique and juxta-position of the past and present. Interesting treatment of psychology is one of the significant features of the novels. The paper deals with the many aspects of technique in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Pearl S. Buck's *Letter from Peking*.

Keywords

Technique; Letters; First Person Narration; Internal Monologues; Flashback Technique and Juxta-position of the Past and Present; Psychology.

Epistolary novels are one among the many types of novels. They present life series in the form of letters, instead of bringing the scenes as the highlights of a logically developed story in a chronological order. According to these novels life is not to be enmeshed in the neat, rounded plots and characters of the traditional novelists. Life is a continuous motion, an endless alteration of ebb and flow. The aberration and complexity of mental life are highlighted. This process of involving the readers directly in the mental experience of the characters, has added a significant dimension to the art of prose fiction.

The epistolary novels gained prominence in the 18th century. Pamela or Virtue rewarded is Samuel Richardson's first epistolary novel in English. Richardson's idea of using epistolary technique to tell his story proves to be a success. In the letters there is a day by day, minute by minute record of Herome's persecution. The pretense and subterfuge is commendable. Richardson by delineating models of virtue seeks to improve morals in society. His central character is a woman who opposes the libertinage of man. By this he does much to elevate the position of women.

Richardson's technique has certain virtues. The characters were wholly pre-occupied with the situation so that they are able to describe and reflect deeply. It is also a dramatic technique in that the letters are equivalent to dramatic speeches. The intensity in character delineation is unparalleled until the days of modern fiction. Though Richardson's novels are impregnated with values, he is the most subjective of the novelists. But his presentation is objective. His characters scrutinize themselves as though they are under a microscope.

Tobias George Smollet wrote the *Expedition of Humphry Clinker* in 1771. This epistolary novel is the most charming of Smollet's novels, which owes its form to Richardson. The novel which takes the characters through various parts of the England, Scotland, Bath, London, Edinburgh and the highlands provides much information on contemporary manners and matters of political and social and religious interest. Though the epistolary form is the chief literary genre of the age, it is Henry Fielding who stands out as the outstanding novelist of the day.

Fielding's *Tom Jones* and Richardson's *Clarissa* have similarity in theme. Fielding brought to the genre of the novel something that is ultimately even more important than narrative technique, a responsible wisdom about human affairs. *Tom Jones* exposes us not merely to an interesting narrative about imaginary persons but also brings us into contact with a wealth of suggestions and challenges on almost every topic of human nature.

[Jane Austen](#), influenced by the eighteenth-century epistolary novel applied this technique in juvenile writings and her [novella](#) *Lady Susan* (1794), but she altered this technique for her later work. Jane Austen's second published novel, *Pride and Prejudice* which contains 44 letters is an example of how the epistolary form is incorporated into other novel genres, preserving the main creed of the epistolary tradition.

In nineteenth-century, [Mary Shelley](#) uses the epistolary narratives in her novel [Frankenstein](#) (1818). Shelley uses the letters as one of a variety of framing devices. [Anne Brontë](#)'s novel [The Tenant of Wildfell Hall](#) (1848) is an epistolary novel which is framed as a series of letters from Gilbert Markham to his friend and brother-in-law about the events leading to meeting his wife. [Bram Stoker](#)'s [Dracula](#) is an epistolary novel. Printed in 1897, the novel is compiled entirely of letters, diary entries and the like, which Stoker adeptly uses the epistolary style to intensify the horror of vampire.

There are several writers in the history of English literature who have used the technique of epistolary narrative in their works. Most of the writers employed this technique only for the sake of communication between the characters. In contrast to these writers, Alice Walker and Pearl S. Buck use epistolary narrative for some consequential purposes in their novel. The novelists use the same technique in a new way and style to discuss the most sensitive issues of the modern times. Unlike Richardson's traditional epistolary novel, the novelists take the traditional form of the epistolary and manipulate it to rewrite the life of the protagonist Celie and Elizabeth.

Alice Walker is one of the major black women writers, who emerged during the literary renaissance of the seventies. She is a highly versatile artist who fights against those who treat women as sexual, political and racial unequals, especially black women. In 1982 she published her third novel *The Color Purple*. The novel won her an American Book Award and Pulitzer Prize for fiction and this places her as a literary celebrity among the most influential American writers. She is the first black woman novelist to win the Pulitzer Prize at the age of thirty-nine.

The Color Purple is distinctive in the African, American literary tradition as an epistolary novel. Walker presents Celie's story in the form of letters. Celie writes fifty six letters to God, and fourteen letters to Nettie and she receives twenty letters from Nettie. There are ninety letters in the novel. It starts with "Dear God" and ends with "Amen" and has the appearance of a long prayer. The feelings of Celie in given situations, her reactions to particular predicaments, the conflicts which arise in her with regard to her course of action, and her motives, reflect her character through the letters, internal monologues, and diary entries.

Celie's many letters to God are more of a diary than letters designed for an addressee who is expected to reply in some form or other, and through them we acquire an intimate knowledge of Celie, her feelings and attitudes, her

experiences and her vague hopes. The more Celie writes, the more she is able to analyse her experience. She uses writing to fix the events of her life, there by lending them coherence and making their review and understanding possible.

Pearl S. Buck, one of the most popular American authors of her day, humanitarian, crusader for women's rights, philanthropist, editor of *Asia* magazine, is noted for her novels revolving around life in China. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938. She became the third American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, following Sinclair Lewis and Eugene O'Neill.

The title *Letter from Peking* is significant. Letters play a predominant role in the novel. Elizabeth receives thirteen letters from Peking from her husband, which includes four from Mei-lan, Gerald's Chinese wife, and also three from her son Rennie. In using the epistolary style, Pearl S. Buck narrates the interracial love between Elizabeth and Gerald, their separation, and Elizabeth's traumatic experiences after receiving the letters.

Elizabeth uses writing not only to narrate the events of her life, but also to free herself from loneliness and sense of separation. When loneliness becomes intolerable, she takes down the box of letters and reads out. "I am here in my room, at my desk, writing. I have locked the letter into my box. I will forget it. At least for a while let me forget, until the numbness has gone from my heart. This is my comfort, to write down all I feel, since there is no one to whom I can speak" (LP 2).

"Psychology is that element in the narrative art that concerns the psyche-that is, the subjective aspect of experience" remarks Fielding (Beach 26). Psychology being the study of psyche processes is brought to bear upon the study of literature, for human psyche is the womb of all the science and arts. To C.G. Jung, "Psychology and the study of art will always have to turn to one another for help, and the one will not invalidate the other" (Lodge 176).

Both Alice Walker and Pearl S. Buck reveal the introspective lives of the characters. They unravel the psyche of the protagonists through effective means of the Technique. The life of hardships and mental agony of the protagonists are traced in their novels. Celie writes about her pathetic situation and her bewilderment in her letters to God, but she receives no reply. She offsets the suppression by expressing herself in letters to her sister. Unlike Celie, the letters which Elizabeth receives from Gerald, increase her mental agony. The separation from her lover is a great psychological shock to her. She faces psychological depression and weariness when her husband asks to leave China.

By using the technique of first person narration the novelists beautifully portray mental exploitations of their protagonists. Even trivial and unimportant events are given importance and they do not miss their place in the narration. Reading the novels the reader is able to find out their inner dilemmas, their emphasis on the multi-dimensional isolation of women, their treatment of the problems of anxiety and despair in woman's life with great psychological reality, placing them in the fore front of the representative writers.

The mode of suffering is different in the lives of Celie and Elizabeth. Celie, a fourteen year girl, is taken away from school by her stepfather and subjects her to sexual harassment even when her mother is alive. It is still more painful since she has to live with her sister's boy friend. The novelist portrays Celie as a slave to sexual harassment and intimidated to do her work in field and at home. Elizabeth, who loves her husband deeply, is an alien in spite of love. The separation from her lover is a great psychological shock to her. She faces psychological depression, agony and weariness when her husband asks to leave China. She cries, "Without you?" (LP 7). Separated from her husband and neglected by him, she weeps and cries and makes up her mind to procure her necessities on her own.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Pearl S. Buck's *Letter from Peking* deal with the characters that show a positive attitude towards life rather than being pessimistic. Celie's experience physical and spiritual, her faithfulness to God and men enables her to direct people towards a life a progression filled with faith, hope and love. Elizabeth is ready to face life boldly after the death of her husband. It doesn't destroy her. Her quest comes to an end. She feels free now. She has no need of further search. She plans to spend her life without Gerald by cherishing his memory. Thus, the novels end on a note of triumph. The agony of the faithless people, loneliness, frustration, hopelessness, poverty, broken families, and loss of family bondage are recurring aspects of their novels. In spite of the tragic situations in life, many of the characters in their novels have a clear vision of life.

Both Alice Walker and Pearl S. Buck bring an awareness of the fact that there is a dimension of human personality that cannot be explained solely on scientific evidence. Their love for humanity, regard for moral values and their keen sense of observation make them successful novelists of the twentieth century. The novelists have brought the reader into direct contact with all that is going on inside the mind of Celie and Elizabeth. One can recognize the rich relevance of the recurring themes to modern times as their characters prove themselves to be participants in the timeless drama of human life. The temperaments, moods, fantasies, associative memories, momentary observations and subconscious thoughts of the protagonists justify the title "Technique as Exploration of the Psyche".

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