

Epistolary Narrative Voice in Albanian Contemporary Novels

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Abstract Although the Epistolary literature played a fundamental role in the development of European novel, its tradition in Albania is very poor. The main reason is that Albanian literature used to have an ideological character; as a result of this, it refused intimate view of the characters' thoughts and feelings. Only after the 1990s, letters became an important literary device in Albanian contemporary novels. The most common form is the use of "interpolated" letters, which supply the narrative works with metaphysical subjectivity. This is due to the fact that letters, diaries, meditation, etc., are forms of personal communication and consequently reflect a deeper relationship of the Being with the self and with the world. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the features of letters in the novels written by Astrit Delvina, Elvira Dones, Bashkim Shehu, etc. The main method used in this paper is a comparative approach through which we aim to analyze the use of "interpolated letters" as a specific stylistic device, as well as a transition "tool" from modernist to postmodernist novel.

Key words Albanian contemporary literature; "interpolated letters"; metaphysical subjectivism; personal communication

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Introduction

Epistolary voice is usually found in letters, diaries, or other literary artefacts which are considered to be representative of private discourse. Although Janet Altman clearly states that letters are “the fundamental vehicles of Epistolary narrative” (Altman 13), the aim of this study is to also take into consideration the role of diaries, notes, meditation and remarks of the narrators in expressing trauma and suppression. Epistolary works are multi voiced narrations, or works without a narrator, because the meaning of the plot comes from the connection of letters. Letter-writers rarely introduce themselves and others. Furthermore, “Epistolary discourse is a fully fledged textual genre in its own right, as it is distinguishable from other types of discourse by specific pronominal and linguistic features (Altman 26), which render it a unique genre” (Dossena and Camiciotti 35), etc. The Epistolary voice supplies the text with distinguished features of metaphysics subjectivism. It happens because letters, diaries, mediation, etc., are all forms of personal communication and as a result linguistics elements tend to convey without any significant changes our real perception of the world (with no direct impact of Ego or Super Ego). Epistolary voice is not a usual phenomenon in Albanian literature. However there is a new trend of using personal communication in Albanian contemporary novels, such as; *In the time of the scream* by Visar Zhiti, *Mozart, with the delay* or the *Circle* by Bashkim Shehu, *Stars don’t get dressed like that* by Elvira Dones, *Globe in the net* by Astrit Delvina, etc.

Letters between Private and Public Discourse

A really interesting novel which is mainly constructed through the interposition of the epistolary voice is *Mozart, with delay* by Bashkim Shehu. In fact it is completely difficult to understand the difference between the letters and the diary, because

Andrea's letters do not reach the recipient (and even do not intend to). However they have central position within the plot. First of all, they serve as the main method to define the characters (which are nominated by the narrator as central actants and peripheral ones). Andrea, is almost a shadow character, because he does not interact very often. He only seems to appear as a central actant when he starts portraying his immense love through writing letters. Altman admits "the letter form seems tailored for the love plot, with its emphasis on separation and reunion" (Altman 55).

Secondly, letters feed the text with lyrical and personal attributes, with poetic of love, a feeling which seems to overpass the overall gaming (which prevails in all other relations where the characters of the novel are involved). Thirdly, the process of transformation of the letters into diaries, inability of communication between lovers, the hiding process, etc., are all signs of a ferocious totalitarian system, which controls or impedes the happiness of human being. The letters written by Andrea, interfere and abruptly interrupt the narration.

The first one is inserted into narration without any prior information related to the character, his love story which was precipitously interrupted, the difficulties or impossibilities of reunion, etc. The confession is conveyed by anonymous voice, which is portrayed through the fulfilling emotion of love. Even the second letter, intentionally breaks the interior logic of narration. While the narration relates about the prearrangements of staging "School of love" opera, the second letter of Andrea is inserted in the plot, a letter which is written a year after. This is followed by a third letter written five years after (July 4, 1967). The last part of the third letter, gives some details related to the anonymous voice, which was completely unknown till then. Biographical information related to the character is given through an atypical method, which seem to be similar to a didascalia which has the function of facilitating of the understanding of circumstances. After the third letter, Epistolary intersections fade away and letters are substituted with the characters meditation.

Referring the above chart, there is a new Epistolary story within the main plot, which brings into surface the tragic relationship between Andrea and Nina. This second story starts with Andrea's letter, goes on with Andrea's diary and it finishes with his meditation. The first letter starts with a promise, which is relevant to the future "I swear to you, my life, I will write to you every day." The vision of the future is unconsciously activated to the lovers, because they need to believe that their love story will be eternal. This letter, starts as the need of communication between two human beings who are in love, hence the articulation of love has a central meaning.

The second epistolary intersection has different features: First of all, it starts

Table 1: Letters and the Features of Epistolary Voice

The Letters of Andrea			
March 17, 1961	May 4, 1962 (midnight)	July 4, 1967	
<p>“My life, I swear, I will write to you every day” Dear Nina, my life, you know, it seems like you are reading my lines right now, exactly in this moment, or as I have you, or I am with you, slightly whispering... (...) (...) A lot of things around me, are detached from the reality around them and they have become a completely different thing, millions of granules, what am I saying, millions of them, which run away with the speed of light, and time and space which divide us disappear, they instantly merge harmonically in the creation of a world, where you and me are the only inhabitants... (Shehu <i>Moxart</i> 46)</p>	<p>My love, my adorable Nina! I have not written to you recently, please forgive me. Things are completely the same, nothing has happened, so you do not have to worry why I have not written. It is not a reason to be happy either, because it does not mean that I have started off. There is little to be happy, when things are completely the same. Quite the contrary. I am barely surpassing the reluctance to explain further, because I almost forgot that you will never read this lines, you will never hear my voice, from thousands of miles away. Do you hear me? I am talking to you. Because I can hardly stand without speaking with you, even though this would be dangerous. They continue to chase me. Or so it seems. (Shehu <i>Moxart</i> 79)</p>	<p>It is cold, Nina, it is freezing here. You do not need to be afraid by the things I have just told you, because all this madness which has dispersed, is nothing more than a death-rattle of this hateful and disgusting system. This is the end, so, Nina, my beloved one, the end is so near and very soon, we will be together again. (Shehu 85)</p>	<p>A black sadness has overcome me, something as a nightmare while I am completely awoken and it followed and suppressed me, it took my breath away, a substanceless effigy, dark fog, black jinnee, which stealthly put into my mind everything he dreamt off ...(because those of embassy, did not find Nina, there in Leningrad, she would have been married and has changed her family name, or God forbid, she is not living any longer, she is dead, rest in peace ...) Here it comes the black jinnee, it mocks me again when it appears, I imagine her again and it immediately casts him away. So, I may think clearer. And I start mediating that ... (Shehu <i>Moxart</i> 92)</p>

with the implication of the past (“Please forgive me I have not written to you lately”). The displacement of the notion of time from the future to the past indicates the suspicion about the continuance of erotic idyll. Secondly, the relation between the Subject and the lover is amplified by the references which indicate the real danger of denaturalization of human who is under the suppression of totalitarian regime. (“They continue to follow me”). The later jeopardy seems to be irrelevant to be written in a love letter. The only explanation is that she will never read those lines. The above features, replenish the second intersection with a crossbreed figuration, which is between the letter and the diary. The third letter highlights the

references of the outside world. It also avoids the stereotypical beginning (**Dear**). Its main goal is not the expression of love (as in the first letter), neither the reflection of the relation between the individual and the totalitarian regime (as in the second “letter”), but the clarification of political relation between communist countries.

In certain ways, personal letters reveal the dialectic of events and relationships way more clearly than diaries do¹ (the breakup from ex-Soviet Union or the political flirt with China). The third intersection, totally avoids any possibility that the lover may read the letter, hence it may be considered as a typical diary page. In the last intersection, the date is missing, the stereotypical beginning of a letter is missing as well, it may be considered as a meditation of the character in his loneliness, unable to find his other-half.

As stated above, we may reach the conclusion that Epistolary intersections may function as an independent narrative line, which is inserted in the plot and highlights the text fragmentation.

Meditative Discourse and the Expression of Self

Meditative discourse is commonly used to enrich the text with the philosophical dimension. The latter does not aim to build metanarrative schemes, but to express personal point of view related to phenomena, people and occurrences. In the *Circle* written by Bashkim Shehu, meditative discourse comes from the reflective journey of the foreign observer, who writes his personal truth related to Albanian cultural world. His meditative discourse includes writings about homosexuality in Albanian art, the difference about the pyramid (the symbol of dictatorship) and financial pyramid schemes, the Albanian pragmatism Eros, etc. The personal explanations of the foreign observer tend to alienate and denaturalize the world, because they function as personal notes, which are taken by someone who may see and understand deeper an unknown reality because he does not have pre-determined stereotypical structures. The personal notes are really heterogeneous and they form a perfect model of syncretic montage. Each of them is autonomous and self-independent, increasing the internal chaos of the text.

As the French literature critic Réda Bensmaïa stated: “The only thing which pieces together these philosophical wanderings is the voice, which alienates well known or even trivial objects, subjects and situations” (Bensmaïa 76). The topics of these philosophical wanderings are really various, and they may include issues as the strange case of harmony between cats and dogs in Albania; the connection

1 Steven Stowe, Making Sense of Letters and Diaries, retrieved by <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/letters/letters.pdf>

between the quantity of garbage and the quality of life, etc. Most of these intersections are totally independent and may be read and enjoyed as a story within a story. The fictional game is created through the illusion of the double narrators, the one using the first form (the one who writes notes about impressions from Albania) and the second the external one (who reads the impressions of the first narrator and tries to rewrite them), i.e. (unreadable writing, my note B.Sh.)” (Shehu, *Rrethi* 140). As Linda Kaufman suggests, Epistolary voices commonly blur “the lines between fiction and reality by including morsels of information that seem to be about [their] ‘real [lives]’” (Kaufman 205).

The idea of incompleteness which sometimes comes from the first narrator (the inability of B.Sh to read the text) and sometimes as a central feature of the text itself makes the reader slow down the reading pace, due to the need of completing the textual units with the proper meaning.

Besides philosophical wanderings (they are apriori fed by changes, deformations, atypical formations) another element of personal discourse is the specific interpretations of cultural artifacts. For example, the new interpretation about the castle of Rozafa, tend to tear down the cultural ideology about the Albanian code of honor. The latter is considered as one of the most important feature of Albanian national psyche. The Epistolary voice tends to shatter the metanarration, through re-semantisation of the legend. This is done through the dissociation from the ethno-folkloric roots, which feed a false ethnical image.

Through the Epistolary voice, another myth is constructed; this one is very important to outline the national identity, the myth of the founding of the city or civilization. The meaningful leap (from the myth of the word of honour¹ to the myth of foundation) is especially important. Although Albanian word of honour is considered to be essential characteristics of national identity, it is in fact the attribute of societies led by ethical principles (sanctioned by the Kanun Code). Such societies are characterized neither by organization nor by sustainable development. Thus, even though the word of honour makes the core identity of the Albanian world, it must be admitted that this value functions on the ground of primitive societies (which are not organized by laws but by normative codes). However, reading the myth of Rozafa, through the city foundation point of view, opens another perspective in the outline of the Albanian cultural world according to a new ethno-folkloric image. The construction of castles is a sign of the new civilization that has just begun to arise. The early days of this civilization position the Albanian identity in the light of another paradigm: that of one of the earliest civilization in the region instead of

1 Besa (word of honor) in Albanian culture is supposed to be an important institution.

primitiveness (which world of honor suggests).

Trauma and Epistolary Body

“The Epistolary mode in fiction has long been associated with the expression of trauma experienced by women who are confined to a private, domestic and interior space. However, this mode, paradoxically, opens up this space because the sending of a letter to an addressee invites the letter’s fictional recipient to act as witness to the letter writer’s account of her painful experiences.” (Bronwen Mairi Louw iii). One of the most dramatic novels written about Albanian women is *Stars do not get dressed like that* by Elvira Dones. It starts with an unusual “letter,” written by a dead narrator. She is Lejla, a girl who was kidnapped, coerced to prostitution, and then tortured and killed. Her letter opens the Pandora’s Box which reveals a shocking reality. Her letter does not deal with an individual trauma expressed in the private realm of the letter, but it also involves a collective history of feminine trauma in Albanian world. (Dones).

Myra Jehlen argues that: “what is peculiar to this genre is that it locates the problems of its society way much deeper inside the self” (Jehlen 75). The novel continues with the stories of other female characters, which suffer the same dramatic destiny, rape, coerce to prostitution, continuous violence, physical punishment, torture and even death. Through the transgressions of violent sexual relations, a stifling atmosphere is created. The text is full of explicit details from the sexual scenes, the “brutality” which create a sense of natural confession¹. This sensation doubles the shock experienced during the reading. Such shattering scenes within the work intend to present the “deformities” of the male psyche in a society that the transition does not only happen on the political level, but also on the human one. The novel draws attention to the so-called “rape culture” in the Albanian context.² However, the novel in itself totally refuses to legitimize it. No wonder the sexual rape is associated with the verbal effort to break the individual’s mind and soul.

1 The presence of the natural narration in the prose of Elvira Dones can not be ignored, because her field experience as a journalist is often confused with artificial confession.

2 Although Albanian literature does not have frequent works on such provocative topics, the Albanian worldview tends towards the extreme legitimization of this culture by blaming the sexually abused woman. On the one hand, she is seen as guilty of aggression, while on the other she has to live with the shame of the happening. For these two reasons, acts of sexual violence remain undeclared in a society that condemns the victims. The roots of this culture are found in societies that encourage male violence against women, in societies which legitimize “physical and emotional terrorism” against women and the ones where even women agree that sexual violence is an inevitable fact.

Thus women in the novel of Elvira Dones are raped, brutally mistreated, beaten, and humiliated. Male sexual prominence is highlighted through emotional words, which clearly evoke violent sexual assault.

It is important to emphasize that the discourse (in the socio-linguistic point of view) is defined as the relationship between the language and the real context. It means that gender stereotypes are linguistically manifested; the way which the relationship between men and women is projected in a particular social context is really important to understand the linguistic tension between them. This specific relationship in Dones' novel is neither balanced, nor healthy. The male stereotype bares the persecutor's sign, while the female is under the sign of the victim. The evocation of taboo words have a negative impact on the feminine psyche. These are signs of sexual dominance by men, who use the language as a tool for submission. Through the characterization of defemizations, it is intended the entire break of the soul, to turn the raped women into a "body" that is being trafficked. But on the contrary it does not happen like that. Their letters, diaries, notes, etc., imply the opposite, their soul is not wiped out, and they are real fighters and real survivors.

Diary as an Open Letter to Self

Diaries are considered to be personal forms which aim to embrace time and memories. Letters and diaries are given common shape by widely shared life events such as births, separations over time and distance, sickness and health, courtships and marriages, and deaths. "Diarists, too, are apt to take up their pen in the face of life transitions, mapping the course of the ordinary or, quite differently, reporting unusual events, such as a long journey or the coming of war. These latter "diaries of situation," as Steven Kagle calls them, sometimes end when the situation resolves (...). Although, they may not have thought about it this way as they wrote, they nonetheless were making for themselves a personal presence in the wider world of the written word typical of their time and place"(Kagle 3).

The diarist might not write about himself but he marks important events of national memory. The same happens in the novel "Circle" by Bashkim Shehu, in which the character writes about the changes of political climate in Albania. The concept of time in that novel is totally stretched, disposing some very important events in a single sentence.

March 22, 1992: Communists left the power, thanks to the elections where the Democratic Party and its allies won two-thirds of the vote (...). April 9, 1992: Sali Berisha, leader of the Democratic Party, is elected President of the Repub-

lic for a five-year term, while the DP increasingly tends to become a party-state ... (Shehu, Roman 149)

The narrator voice goes from perceptions, meditations, and interpretations to judgment about events, phenomena and characters. This cognitive process is carried out through an illusory distance created by the positioning of the fictional narrator as a foreigner. His distance to the object or subject that is being analyzed makes his judgment more objective. This phenomenon has the function of “liberating the truth” from aesthetic of fiction, as Theodor Adorno states (Adorno Theory 152).

Another novel structured on diaries is *Globe in the net* (Globi në rrjetë) by Astrit Delvina. Most of the literary text seem to be similar (or sometimes identical) to the author’s own life. But as Steve Stowes states: “Although some diaries may seem like autobiographies in their approach to time, contextualizing everything in terms of “I,” it is well to remember that for all of their expressiveness, diaries do not, like autobiographies, look back on the past. Diaries draw their energy from the way the writer searches for meaning while in the edge of changing events and relationships which no one completely grasps.” The diarist searches to give the mass of associations and trail of events meaning by finding a consistent voice, whereas the letter writer seeks continuity in the flow of letters, in the personal ties they represent as well as for the news that they bear.” The central narration in the novel comes from the Epistolary voice that writes about the most important moments of his life. In his diary, as well, appear details about dramatic happenings with worldwide effects:

A line of meridian (...) separates the world in two parts; Materialism and Idealism. Another line separates a country in two parts, (two Germanys, two Koreas, and ex-two Vietnams). A third one separates a city in two parts (Berlin), a fourth one separates a family in two parts (fathers and sons, bourgeois father and communist son) and a fifth one – most tragic and anxious of all is the one who separates a human in two parts! Self, separated in two entities. – Self-duplication and human dispersion. (Delvina 14)

Considering the dramatic events which are involved in self-writing process, we may notice a kind of internal tension, which “changes” the expected form of writing the diary. Arlon’s diary lasts only 24 hours, and every hour is cautiously monitored, i.e. “4 and 48’ Antila once said “When I don’t see you nothing tastes the same” (Delvina 24). The form adopted by the writer allows him to double use the concept of time:

it is his past (his love story with Atila) and the present, which is strongly diffused in memories, meditation, etc. It seems that the time is stuck, the past (of the individual, country or the whole world) “inundates” the narration. Meanwhile the present is almost missing.

On one hand, there is a continuous persistence to grab every second of the present (it is a very intensive diary, which aims at memorizing every hour of the day). On the other, when the homodiegetic narration starts writing, there is only one thing that is related to the present: a continuous anxiousness and fear for his lover, Antila, who has not arrived yet and God knows why she has not arrived yet. The concept of present is fading away, because the narrator needs to escape to his day, his life. He only needs his love and he is terrified from the idea that she might not manage to get back, due to something hideous which is lurking outside. The diary is used as a mean of relieving the internal anxiousness, which is very common phenomenon in totalitarian regime. It completely explains the tension of 24 hours, which are the last ones spent in freedom for Arlon. The net which has caught the entire globe, grabs his own freedom, his own life.

Conclusions

As a result it should be stated that the Epistolary discourse occupies a specific space between the public and the private. On one hand, letters, diaries, notes, meditations, etc., may shed light on individual perspectives of the narrator. On the other, they may reflect many aspects of socio-cultural or political life in a certain moment. Letters and diaries in Albanian contemporary literature are strongly related to trauma and suppression which are deeply rooted in the totalitarian regime. The Epistolary discourse brings into surface fear and anxiety, oppression and internal alienation of the human being, who needs letters and diaries to give his soul a voice.

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