

# Of personal letters

by Suchita Malik

**M**Y “Indo-Amrikan” nephew and I are very good pen-pals. The correspondence began almost a decade back when he and I, sharing almost similar literary tastes and interests, began to write to each other almost on a fortnightly basis. I was fascinated by his literary sensitivity as also for his urge to communicate with people of diverse cultures so as to chance upon, perhaps innovative ideas. He, too, reciprocated the same feelings.

Then came the advent of superfast technology in the form of internet. Instant messaging with unbelievable high speed became the order of the day. We, too, fell for its charm. One could talk almost every-

day, anywhere, anytime. It seemed amazing in the beginning but gradually the messages became too short, mechanical, to the point and lacking in warmth or thought. It became a different “short-hand lingo” and lost out on its freshness. The zing in communication went missing with no looking for the mailbox, no pleasure of eager opening of the letter and no charm of the written word. The creative flow of ideas, too, came to an abrupt end.

Gradually, we reverted to our age-old habit of writing personal letters only. The slowly dying art, that has been relegated to the periphery of modern education, needs to be revived for its old-world charm as also for its free play of ideas as well as

expression.

The often overlooked genre of the “personal letter” had also been used in the past by poets to arrive at new ways of thinking about their poems. The exchange of thoughts among the intellectuals and poets certainly gave rise to the quality of lyricism in their work.

In fact, the “personal letter” has always been a balanced genre — part practical necessity and part literary performance. It has also been the most cowardly way to break up with your lady love to say something that one would feel shy of expressing otherwise.

Today’s letter is flat, straight, devoid of the web of emotions and makes a very lousy read. The other day, I chanced upon

a letter that came for my daughter from her bosom friend and classmate of more than a decade. I quote: “Yaar... Kokil ‘n’ Carmel confetti ka add. De... hwz life... result out? Hwz akanksha? 4gt to call her... ragged ur juniors? I did n was caght in a gr8 panga... newayz learn 2 keep ur cl wid urself... un u cumin 2 chd? Wishing u d v best in life...”

I sat non-plussed for some time, lost in thought, wondering at the amazing flexibility of the language, reducing it to the level of mockery itself. And as I have been tackling some of Keats’ great Odes in the college this semester, I was completely out of my wits on seeing a text message version of Keats’ famous explanation of

“negative capability” (as originally set forth in a letter to his brothers, George and Thomas):

J Keats I : Iz try N 2 dev mor neg cap.

G&T Keats : Watz dat?

J Keats I : dat bn N uncertainties - miseries — doubts w/o NE irritable reachN aftr fact & reasN

G&T Keats : kewl

As it is, the concept of “negative capability” in Keats is not easy to explain to the students. The above reproduced text remains even a greater mystery to me. Considering the state of “negative capability”, I almost swore to stick to my obsolete habit of writing the letter or rather pen down the personal letter even in this modern age and still feel proud of it. ■