Listening for the Social Conscience of Black Literary Voices

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Abstract. Black literary voices exemplify writers with prominent social consciences. These great historical voices, as a result of a society questing for justice and equality, were central to encouragement of racial pride, attachment to black identity, and integration of races. However, the modern black literary voice has shifted to become less provocative and more mainstream. A major reason for this trend may be a false sense of security brought about by the perceived success of the civil rights movement. An analysis of census and other statistical reports reflect significant gaps in educational and economic status compared with the majority general public. The need for strong and vibrant black literary voices stands out to address the misconception of the present day state of blacks.

Introduction

Great writers displaying strong social consciences fight as soldiers with pens in hand. They fight for justice, freedom and equality. Often cast as the moral compass of their respective communities, their objective is to enlighten readers of the practical difficulties encountered by everyday people when inequality manifests itself. Their chosen task is to address those areas within societies that need to be changed to benefit the oppressed, discriminated or disenfranchised. Many conscientious writers have used the literary platform to promote minority views, as well as their personal perspectives and visions. In this way, they have affected history.

Due to black American history being so tragic, the title ‘black writer’ is a unique honor that carries with it expectations of deep social responsibility. To some degree, as mouthpieces of their race, they are expected to be the community voice to the world at large. By sharing the black experience, acting as vehicles of black self-awareness, and promoting intellectual ability to pursue changes in a racially charged environment, they connect themselves directly with freedom, justice and equality. From being openly discriminated against to a more positive environment, many black peripheral literary voices had far-reaching impacts on history, especially on the social, political and economic status of the blacks.

Although the twentieth century witnessed impressive reform in favor of the blacks, their present position in the USA is still unsatisfactory. According to statistical reports, there are significant gaps in education levels, graduation rates, family poverty numbers and political influence at both national and local levels, compared with white populace. More modern writers, with a powerful sense of mission and responsibility, are still needed to form a new wave of literary voices that can unremittingly strengthen moral values and strive against racial and economic inequality. It is vital that today’s black writers continue to be the social conscience that was demonstrated so successfully during the Harlem Renaissance and through the Civil Rights Movement.

Strong Historical Black Literary Voices

Throughout American history, the black literary world used the literature forum to reveal and fight against the predicament of black people. They continued their struggle, from generation to generation, for a better and equal society. Black writers proclaimed a new racial consciousness in
literature after the Civil War. This trend continued throughout the most influential and productive periods in American black literary history—the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement.

**Black Literary Voices in the Harlem Renaissance**

The Harlem Renaissance was instrumental in providing a forum for black literary and other artistic styles to share their talents. It also brought to the forefront the extremely discouraging social environment of black people in America. Alain Locke, the father of the Harlem Renaissance defined it as a literary and intellectual flowering, as well as 'a spiritual coming of age' where the black community was able to seize upon 'its first chance for group expression and self-determination' and a transformation of 'social disillusion to race pride'[1]. It put an end to the period of the slave narrative and made prominent many talented writers. This period at the turn of the 20th century saw a change in how black people came to view their role in American society. They began not to simply protest the discriminatory practices, but to develop a self-awareness of racial pride. This paradigm was led by the black literary figures of that time.

Living in the time when white people dominated American society, blacks stood on the margins of politics, economy, and culture. They were excluded from mainstream society, belittled, vituperated, assaulted, and insulted. Their poems not only stirred blacks out of their passivity and complacency but also inspired them to a new militancy in response to their ongoing suffering, especially to frequent lynching and other acts of racist terrorism. 'If we must die, O let us nobly die, so our precious blood may not be shed in vain.' In the poem 'If We Must Die', Claude McKay, known as one of the most militant writers during the Harlem Renaissance, expresses the new sentiment of not merely accepting or just protesting the status quo but willing to be an activist with fearless pluck and perseverance against racial discrimination [2].

As representatives of their people, many black writers during the Harlem Renaissance committed to vernacular sources as an important basis for their art. They inherited and developed the black American tradition and directed their works to the racial masses, rather than the white-led literary society. Black literary voices were particularly concerned about social situations and living conditions of middle and lower-class black people by speaking candidly to the discrimination, which allowed black people to see themselves as equal regardless of how they were treated in the social environment of the time.

**Black Literary Voices in the Civil Rights Movement**

The Civil Rights Movement grew out of the struggle of black Americans to regain constitutional rights long denied them. The Movement took advantage of the nation's courts, political pressure and activist protests, eventually succeeding in ending decades of legal discrimination. In the hard process of concentrating its efforts on desegregation and seeking integration, literary voice played a significant role.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., an undaunted Civil Rights leader and an excellent writer of social mission, made the most notable contribution to arouse American moral awareness and counter discrimination. He combined deep religious values with social conscience to form what some might call social gospel. In his most famous speech, 'I Have a Dream', Dr. King articulated a call for full integration of blacks into mainstream America. His words are forever etched in history and repeated throughout the world.

Baldwin is a prime example of black writers who understood the importance of advocating the black cause in the fight against racism during the civil rights movement. He explored in his works interracial love, overt racism, Christianity and bisexual relations. His theme of socially conscious writing is made evident in the following quote:

'Now, it is true that the nature of society is to create, among its citizens, an illusion of safety; but it is also absolutely true that the safety is always necessarily an illusion. Artists are here to disturb the peace'.

In almost all historic phrases that benefited black Americans, there existed great black literary figures whose works reflected upon reality and had a profound influence on the American psyche.
That influence, addressing the role of black Americans as citizens and encouraging dignity and self-confidence, is everlasting. Black writers not only exposed and incisively criticized racism, but also explored the moral weight from a black perspective to arouse public conscience. They have made tremendous impressions on inspiring growth in racial pride for black people, changing white’s attitudes and establishing racial integration. Black literary voices effectively helped to search for racial equality in the social and political quagmires of America.

Lack of Vibrant Contemporary Black Literary Voices

Brett Foster, a major contributor to the Center for Public Justice, wrote a series of articles in October and November 2011 on the trend of contemporary American literature. He suggests writers today are not particularly socially conscious by saying that they often intentionally find it easy and desirable to separate themselves from social issues. His Capital Commentary tells some of the reasons:

“Moreover, with so many American poets, the fact of their employment in multitudinous creative writing programs contributes to this impression of social or economic separation. Doubtless, the securities of tenure have ensured that many of us writers have not felt the direct, most brutal effects of the economic downturn”[3].

But can black writers now safely separate themselves from social issues to focus their writings on a more lucrative audience? Looking at current statistics on education and economics in America, one wonders how much and to what degree have blacks progressed socially and economically and if there are any possibilities and questions to be raised relative to the need for black voices to address social inequities.

Current Gap in Education and Economic Status

Education is the cornerstone of economic and political status improvement. A summary report from 2013 National Bureau of Economic Research entitled 'The Declining American High School Graduation Rate: Evidence, Sources, and Consequences'[4] reported a decrease in high school graduation for black students; 65 per cent of black students graduating from high school, resulting in fewer blacks entering universities. These figures reflect significant racially based gaps in education.

As the gap in education, poverty shows the gap in the economic status of black people. Data taken from US census reports from 1975 to 2015 suggests the following:

The percent of black families living in the United States beneath the poverty guidelines compared to total black families has remained above 25 per cent since the year 1975.

As a result, more than three out of every ten black families with children under the age of eighteen live below the poverty guidelines.

Recent economic downturns have affected black families at a higher rate than white families. Black families continue to be disproportionately affected by poverty in the United States. The two major factors might be 1) Black people live closer to poverty levels so they bear the brunt of economic downturns. 2) Black people have traditionally been the last hired in many professions, so when companies have a tendency downward, they often terminate those with less seniority.

The Chicago Sun-Times reported on July 10, 2015 that the median net worth gap between white and black people continues to grow, which increases the likelihood of more and more black families leaving the middle class to join those living in poverty. The report states the average net worth for white families fell 24 per cent between the years 2004 and 2009 while the figure for black families fell 83 per cent over the same time period. For white families it was $97,860 and for black families $2,170 in 2009. The data infers that while government policy may not be overtly racially biased, black families are still disproportionately represented amongst those who live below the poverty guidelines.

Lack of Contemporary Black Literary Voices

Therefore, it appears the problems that were so eloquently discussed by black writers in the past are still prevalent nowadays. While, there is a need for socially conscious writers today on one hand, they
do not seem to be as prevalent or vociferous on the other hand. There are certainly a large number of black writers, perhaps more than ever, but their emphasis seems to have shifted from addressing social problems to popular writings in the mainstream that provide them with lucrative careers.

The following factors may contribute to the inadequate number of writers with social consciousness. 1) The lack of demand from the general public for such literature may have influenced those writers who have chosen other literary avenues for expressing their talents. 2) Many of the social conscious writers were products of the Great Depression and wartime, who understood the importance of community and mutual support. However, this co-dependent attitude is not shared by present day writers and readers who have the selfish 'me first' outlook on life. The 'me first' generation refers to those individuals that were born between the end of World War II and the mid-1960s. A well-known writer, Thomas Wolfe, was one of the first to coin the phrase 'me first' generation during the 1970s [5]. This generation of Americans is known for being far less concerned with social issues and much more with personal gain. This difference can be seen in other art forms including television shows. In the 70s and 80s many television shows carried messages regarding moral and social values. For example, the Cosby show was immensely popular at that time. While the cast was an upper middle class black family, the general theme was one of making appropriate moral and social decisions. Most television shows today do not attempt to address varied social problems as exemplified by the later TV sitcom, Seinfeld, which is an example of a show that chose not to deal with social issues to any depth. Therefore, it is understandable why many present day writers did not grow up with an emphasis on society as a whole, but instead manifest ego-centric perspectives in their work.

How does one fill the perceived void of black socially conscious writers? One option is to utilize internet technology via blog sites and web sites. Contemporary writers no longer have to depend on mainstream publication outlets. The continuing growth of blog sites and extensive web sites offer inexpensive options for writers to share their thoughts, virtually uncensored. One possible solution is to develop a peer to peer review web site dedicated to social conscious writings. Young writers might post samples of their work and have others critique them. Those writers who demonstrate great promise and talent would then have their writings published online, which might serve as a catalyst for their careers. A second avenue for young writers is self-publishing. New technology has led to explosive growth in self-published books. This allows writers to write, publish, market and sell their books independently of major publishing houses. Although cost of self-publishing is low as compared with publishing houses, it does have some major drawbacks. The primary hurdle is that the young writers usually do not have the means to significantly market their literary works thus reducing exposure. While there is nothing wrong with modern writers and publications changing what they write and publish, there is still room for those who have a strong social conscience to create works that stir debate on whether it is acceptable that children are prone to failure because of their skin color or their parent's income.

There appears to be some movement toward more social conscious writers [6]. Due to September 11 anniversaries and global economic and political upheavals, socially conscious literature is gaining new energy. Such literature as these is expected to challenge American’s perceptions of self.

Summary

Literary voices of social conscience serve far greater causes than merely putting words on paper and entertaining. They are beacons, providing direction for the less fortunate to pursue equality. They are warriors, fighting for the downtrodden to seek justice. This is manifestly so with regard to the strong voices of historical black literary figures. Today, the nation is still in need of those who understand the importance of being a moral compass. Instead of willing to accept the status quo of black students attending inferior schools, even not graduating, and more than three out of ten black families living in poverty, literary world needs to form a new wave of voices to keep these issues in the forefront of the ongoing debates. There are children out there too young and too small to be heard. There are brethren out there longing for effective literary leadership. Black people are waiting for social voices of
reason. They are waiting not just to hear the echo of the past but the boom of voices again across the country. The new voices should be as powerful as what they were in the past to bring attention to the need for change: a change that will ensure each black child the chance of a good education and ensure each family a right to a decent life.

'Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave. I rise, I rise I rise'. What Maya Angelou wrote, with the closing lines, in the poem, 'Still I Rise', could serve as a slogan for blacks. From the depths of enslavement to the civil rights movement, they persevered. Each step of the journey was chronicled by outstanding black literary figures. The journey has not yet finished and the struggle remains. It must not just be recorded, but led by black literary voices to forge the way ahead.

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