

Issues of Social Justice Through Literature

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The triumphs of the Cuban Revolution can be observed today in spite of the serious economic difficulties now plaguing the country. As a visitor from the “Coloso del Norte,” I made special efforts to compare what I had read in the literature produced by Cubans to the social reality of 1997 and 1998--the years in which I made my brief trips to the island nation. Walking through the streets of Havana, I tuned my ears to the distinctive speech patterns captured in the works of Nicolás Guillén and Guillermo Cabrera Infante. During my long bus rides to the rural areas in the eastern provinces, I recalled the descriptions written by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, who, despite her connection to Spain, felt a stronger attachment to Cuba.

After experiencing the initial wonder at living in a country which I had only come to know through its literature, I took advantage of the opportunities afforded me to read non-poetic, non-satirical, and non-romantic texts. I sought out Cuban citizens with whom I could talk and of whom I could inquire about their unique society. In most conversations, the topic of the “triumfo de la Revolución” would arise. This phrase suggested the establishment of social reforms for the common good, as well as a just society. In short, it implied a bright future for all; but, as I observed, it also implies constant struggle, enormous sacrifice, and uncertainty in the years to come with regard to maintaining economic and social parity.

An overview of the 1959 Revolution's accomplishments suggest only positive social benefits. Its major triumphs are: 1. the elimination of social classes; 2. the nationalization of the nation's industries; 3. the systematic establishment of educational opportunities for all citizens (with a dynamic literacy program emphasizing rural outreach); 4. the promulgation of a strong national identity as well as solidarity; 5. the provision of housing for all Cubans; 6. the elimination of racial discrimination; 7. the promotion of social equality for women; 8. easy access to free health care; 9. the implementation of an industrialization program corresponding to Cuba's agriculture and natural resources; and 10. the promotion of Cuba as a Caribbean political power (Chang-Rodríguez, 264-266).

Unfortunately, for each major contribution to Cuba's good, we can find aspects of the revolutionary government's policies which have caused problems for its citizens. For example, in order to maintain solidarity and a strong sense of national identity, the government exercises total control of the media, thereby inhibiting the completely free flow of information to the people. The rise of dissident voices creates disunity in a country which is small and is experiencing critical economic problems. At this difficult time--the period following the disintegration of the Soviet bloc and the current United States embargo--the praiseworthy accomplishments of the Revolution are in jeopardy. The lack of food, medicines, and other commodities which would even slightly improve the Cuban people's present situation has made it extremely hard for the government to maintain the enviable advantages of free health care and education for all. It has become harder to preserve a classless society with the establishment of tourism as the nation's leading industry. Cubans who have access to tourists' money can afford a few more goods which could make their lives a bit less difficult. In addition to foreign money from tourism, Cubans have the chance to earn income from *trabajo por cuenta propia* (self-

employment). The widespread acceptance of working independently of the government has the potential to seriously affect the country's lifestyle. The economic pressures brought about by the blockade (periodo especial) "promote participation both inside and outside formal institutions, including black market activities that may challenge the values of cooperation and sharing that continue to define neighborhood and community in Cuba" (Lutjens, 26).

Other advances in the social realm are under attack as well due to the changing economic scene. The total elimination of racial discrimination and complete social equality for women are revolutionary objectives which still prove to be subjects for lively discussion among Cubans and non-Cubans. Perhaps these two goals of the Revolution, more than any of the others, can serve as barometers for considering the theme of social justice in Cuba. If we truly wish to understand this term "social justice," we must realize that it contains two concepts found in the roots of the words:

society < SOCIUS (Latin) = companion (compañero) and justice < JUS = right, law. It seems appropriate that the root of the word "society," and, therefore, the root of its derivative "social," means "companion" or "compañero" in Spanish. This word, which indicates solidarity, camaraderie, and equality, can be used before a Cuban's given name; or as a means to address an unknown compatriot. I recall hearing this form of address in Havana. "¿Adónde vas, compañera?" asked a young woman when she saw that I was slightly unsure as to exactly where my hostel room was located. The phrase "social justice" includes a sense of legal entitlement: by right and by law, each citizen receives fair treatment.

In his poem "Tengo," Nicolás Guillén gives voice to the many compañeros of color who daily suffered indignities before the 1959 Revolution:

Cuando me veo y toco  
yo, Juan sin Nada no más ayer,  
y hoy Juan con Todo,  
y hoy con todo,  
vuelvo los ojos, miro,  
me veo y toco  
y me pregunto cómo ha podido ser.  
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Tengo, vamos a ver,  
tengo el gusto de ir  
yo, campesino, obrero, gente simple,  
tengo el gusto de ir  
(es un ejemplo)  
a un banco y hablar con el administrador,  
no en inglés,  
no en señor,  
sino decirle compañero como se dice en español.

Tengo, vamos a ver,  
que siendo un negro  
nadie me puede detener  
a la puerta de un dancing o de un bar.

O bien en la carpeta de un hotel  
gritarme que no hay pieza,  
una mínima pieza y no una pieza colosal,  
una pequeña pieza donde yo pueda descansar. (Guillén, 214)

Guillén's poem captures the genuine feeling of triumph that the Revolution offered to all Cuban citizens, regardless of race, color, or origin. his poem can also be heard as the liberated voice of women who participated in the Revolution with courage and commitment equal to that of their male counterparts. Unfortunately, Guillén's compatriots of today are faced with economic challenges which threaten to build up the very social barriers which the poetic voice of "Tengo" says have been toppled. In an effort to maintain the established social order at this time, Cubans cannot stay in hotels designated specifically for tourists. Women's roles are also undergoing major changes within the socialist system. While some are taking on leadership positions in their communities or party cells, others are taking on major money-earning responsibilities through legal and illegal means. Much has been written about the increase in prostitution--the type of *trabajo por cuenta propia* that is roundly condemned by the government.

In the face of present and past assaults on Cuban socialism, the island's writers have sought to depict its social reality for better and for worse. Three writers who reveal serious issues of social justice in their works are Manuel Cofiño, Senel Paz, and Daisy Rubiera Castillo. Each presents a Cuba in conflict with respect to race, sexual preference, and gender. The conflicts discussed in these writers' works revolve around the axis of the "triumphant Revolution," the ideological center of contemporary Cuban life.

Manuel Cofiño was a well-known novelist and short story writer who attempted to depict his society as it found its way past the heady times of Guillén's "Tengo" and into the seventies and eighties. His novels and stories allow us to see contemporary Cubans coping with the triumphs and tragedies specific to an island nation in political and ideological conflict with its neighbors. His collections of short stories include *Tiempo de cambio* for which he won the FAR Prize in 1969; *Un día el sol es juez* (1976), *Un pedazo de mar y una ventana* (1979), and *El anzueto dorado* (1988). Among his novels, *La última mujer y el próximo combate* and *Amor a sombra y sol* are noteworthy, with the first having earned him the 1971 award from Casa de las Américas.

The novel *Cuando la sangre se parece al fuego*, one of his most discussed works, not only dramatizes the personal sacrifices of the revolutionaries--men and women whose ideals triumphed in 1959--but it also puts forth the question: Where does cultural identity belong within a revolutionary ideological framework? The novel's main character Cristino Mora Argudín, a young mulato from Havana becomes a member of a *ñáñigo* sect. He also takes part in the fight against Batista's corrupt dictatorship. After the 1959 Revolution, he rejects his Afro-Cuban religious beliefs, and becomes totally committed to the Communist Party's ideology.

Cofiño utilizes a variety of perspectives to emphasize the protagonist's conflicted personality. He employs third and second-person narration to describe the young man's confused state of mind, while a first-person narrative is used to relate events in his life. In his own voice, Cristino tells how his grandmother openly and proudly practices *santería*. There are numerous anecdotes concerning her character's rituals; however, Cofiño stops short of making her appear to be merely a precious eccentric. She is a strong force in the novel, but not strong enough to keep her grandson loyal to the Abakuá gods.

Cuando la sangre se parece al fuego recalls Alejo Carpentier's 1933 novel *Ecué-Yamba-O* which relates the story of a young man from the country who arrives in Havana. There he becomes part of a *ñáñigo* sect, and participates in the religious and political activities of the group. In Carpentier's novel, the protagonist comes to accept his African identity, recognizing his true self as an *ekobio* (brother-member). He also rises up against discrimination through violence. Such self-recognition is not apparent in the character Cristino Mora who wavers between believing the mythology of *Abakuá* and accepting the ideology of the Revolution. In a doctor's report we see that he is a conflicted personality:

Cristino Mora fue uno de mis casos más interesantes. . . . El caso era difícil porque si bien la toma de conciencia revolucionara [sic] estaba dada y su origen humilde lo identificaba al nuevo orden social, en él convivían todavía un mundo de dioses y un patrón de conducta y de valores propios de la más pobre escala social anterior y muy específicamente de la secta *abakuá* a la cual perteneció, y de la influencia de la santería de su abuela. (Cofiño, 199).

Although Mora rejects his grandmother's gods, he does not find peace with socialism. This political system should ensure the eradication of racism and the end of corruption. However, he admits that the true triumph is difficult to achieve:

Cuando tumbamos a Batista, yo pensé que habíamos ganado. No imaginaba que lo difícil comenzaba. Yo sabía poco de socialismo. Después fue el odio a los norteamericanos que no dejaban que hiciéramos lo que queríamos. Se creían que porque éramos chiquitos nos iban a poner de rodillas y obligarnos a hacer lo que a ellos les convenía. (Cofiño, 222-223).

Cristino Mora seems to be the perfect revolutionary because Cofiño has depicted him as a politically savvy man who actively seeks to improve himself through education. Certainly, this is an admirable goal; but the final paragraph of the book, a repetition of the novel's third paragraph, describes a dream-like scene for which there can be many interpretations:

Tú, descalzo en el primer peldaño de esa escalera. Tere, con sus trenzas y sus ojos de alucinada en el segundo peldaño de esa escalera. Tú, con un papalote en el tercer peldaño de esa escalera. Tú y Aimé, en el cuarto peldaño de esa escalera. Tú, otro y no el que eres, en el quinto peldaño de esa escalera (Cofiño, 244).

The last sentence creates a multiple-mirror effect: "Tú, otro y no el que eres en cada peldaño de esa escalera que derrumbarán de un momento a otro junto con todo lo que entristeció tu vida."

Certainly, one interpretation can be that there are many Cristinos (e.g., the one who was, the one who is); but there is also a sense of a lack of something ("no el que eres"). Could it be a lack of (a) character due to his rejection of his African ancestors' beliefs? The characters mentioned--his sister and a girl from his past--are placed above and below one of his selves. He cannot escape his past, yet he has a kite (papalote) which can indicate an ideal which can never really be part of his reality. At this point in *Cuando la sangre se parece al fuego*, we see that there

can be no happy conclusion even though the protagonist has embraced the socialist ideology. He is not guaranteed contentment; but rather must face a tenuous present and an uncertain future.

The matter of sexual preference provides the source of conflict in Senel Paz' *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* (1991). Within Fidel Castro's Cuba, homosexuality is deemed taboo. Same-sex relationships are not condoned. Homosexuality is seen as decadent and perverse--a practice that reflects the corruption brought in by foreign influences, most notably those of the United States. Therefore, social justice for homosexuals seems to be the last thing that the Revolution would seek to establish.

Condemned as a moral failing and cited as a major health risk with regard to the AIDS epidemic, homosexuality--particularly male homosexuality--was not usually considered appropriate literary subject matter after the Revolution. Writers such as Lezama Lima and Reinaldo Arenas wrote about gay life, but they suffered for their honesty in depicting characters who were unashamed of their sexual preference.

The one aspect of *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* which stands out is the character Diego's insistence that he is as much a revolutionary as his friend David. References to daily life in Havana constantly appear throughout the novel: people go to ice cream parlors, attend university classes, and try to read books which are not available to the general Cuban public. Diego resides in the capital, but he does not completely identify with his compatriots. He describes himself in this way:

Yo, uno: soy maricón. Dos: soy religioso. Tres: he tenido problemas con el sistema; ellos piensan que no hay lugar para mí en este país, pero de eso, nada; yo nací aquí; soy antes de todo, patriota y lezamiano, y de aquí no me voy ni aunque me peguen candela por el culo. Cuatro: estuve preso cuando de la UMAP. Y cinco: los vecinos me vigilan, se fijan en todo el que me visita (Paz, 19-20).

As evidenced by his five-point personal sketch, he is not the type of person who is considered a true revolutionary in Cuba. He does not fit the image of a "compañero," that is, of a peer, an equal. Rather, he seems to have more in common with the hedonistic (foreign) capitalists who sought to economically, sexually, and culturally exploit the island.

Diego's desire for sensual pleasures excludes him from a society whose members are deprived of basic needs let alone creature comforts. As an outsider in this society, and, in a cultural sense, as an outcast, Diego cannot expect acceptance. Consequently, he cannot expect just treatment within the Cuban legal system. For this reason, he leaves his homeland; but not before influencing David, a young socialist heterosexual male who witnesses his friend's suffering in a society which persecutes homosexuals. The character of David certainly appears to be the stereotypical ideal socialist. His background ("¿Quién eres realmente tú, muchachito? ¿Ya se te va a olvidar que no eres más que un guajirito de mierda que la Revolución sacó del fango y trajo a estudiar en la Habana?" Paz, 29) and his commitment to the ideology which he has learned distinguish him as a good Cuban citizen. However, he wishes to know about the books not readily found in the stores and stalls of Havana. Having experienced the joy of reading "forbidden" texts and the pleasure of a sincere friendship with Diego, David comes to realize the need for tolerance in a society that openly persecutes homosexuals. The young man makes a revolutionary conclusion: ". . . que al próximo Diego que atravesara en mi camino lo defendería a capa y espada, aunque nadie me comprendiera, y que no me iba a sentir más lejos de mi Espíritu y de mi

Conciencia por eso, sino al contrario, porque si entendía bien las cosas, eso era luchar por un mundo mejor para ti, pionero, y para mí “ (Paz, 59). The author leaves the reader with the hope that all Cubans may be part of the socialist government system, thereby making the world a better place.

While the full political inclusion of homosexuals in Cuban society is not yet a reality, the participation of women in every aspect of the country's post-1959 governmental development has been its hallmark. The importance of women's contributions to the Revolution can be seen every day in Cuba, for it is women who, as mothers, workers, and soldiers continue to fight for Cuba's survival which is now made much more difficult by adverse economic conditions.

The contributions made by women of African descent to Cuban society is manifold. The journey from slavery to freedom for generations of Afro-Cubans was made through the strength and faith of the women. Inhuman working conditions, the constant threat of sexual exploitation and violence, combined with unexpected separation from family members are a few of the tortures instituted by the slave system. The harsh reality of slavery as practiced in Cuba is part of the life story presented in *Reyita, sencillamente*. This “testimonio de una negra cubana nonagenaria” is an eyewitness account of Cuban history which covers part of the nineteenth century and most of this one. The book, written by the daughter of the ninety-six-year-old narrator, reflects the triumphs of a black woman within pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary Cuban society.

The narrative voice is that of María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno who was born on January 6 (el Día de los Reyes) in 1902. During her lifetime, major events such as the suppression of the Partido Independiente de Color; the appearance of the Marcus Garvey movement in the 1920s; and the overthrow of numerous corrupt dictatorships created turmoil from which few Cuban citizens could escape. Finally, sustained political stability and social equality were brought about by the 1959 Revolution. Reyita's personal history, as told to her daughter in June of 1996, reflects the absence and establishment of justice in the ever-changing society of the island nation. Questions of race, color, and class are raised throughout the book. From the very first page, the reader comes to the unpleasant conclusion that there is little or no justice for blacks in Cuba. In particular, black women faced racial discrimination and sexual exploitation. Their inferior social status comes into view through the section titles found in *Reyita, sencillamente*: “Blanco mi pelo, negra mi piel,” “¿Quién soy?,” “Una niña negra,” and the candidly entitled “Por qué me casé con un blanco.” In spite of the unpleasant subject matter mentioned in her account, there is little evidence of resentment. The painful incidents of her extraordinary life have not made the narrator a bitter woman. On the contrary, Reyita demonstrates an enormous amount of courage and grace in coping with the harsh reality of being a very dark-skinned Afro-Cuban woman in her country.

Three examples of injustice based on color preference illustrate serious social problems which were commonly found, and, according to Reyita, are still found in Cuba:

Yo fui víctima de una terrible discriminación por parte de mi mamá. Pero si a eso se suma la que había en Cuba, se podrá entender por qué nunca quise un marido negro. Yo tenía una razón importante, que lo explica todo ¿sabes? No quería tener hijos negros como yo, para que nadie me los malmirara, para que nadie me los vejara, me los humillara. ¡Ay, sólo Dios sabe. . .! No quise que los hijos que tuviera sufrieran lo que sufrí yo. Por eso quise adelantar la raza, por eso me casé con un blanco (Rubiera Castillo, 17).

La discriminación racial en Cuba era muy fuerte y un asunto muy complicado. Los blancos discriminaban a los negros, estos les guardaban rencor a los blancos; los negros que lograban una posición económica y social, lo hacían con los negros pobres y hasta buscaban una blanca para casarse (Rubiera Castillo, 26).

Ahora, ya no hay que preocuparse por el color de la piel. Aunque, bueno, yo sé de muchas personas en las que aún perduran serios problemas raciales. He oído hablar de muchachas negra que no han empleado en una oficina, para favorecer a una blanca; puestos que con cualquier pretexto no se lo dan a un negro, para asegurárselo a un blanco. Son muchos los que aún conservan esa mentalidad, no sé por qué se empeñan en mantener latente ese problema (Rubiera Castillo, 26-27).

This last observation contradicts one of the major triumphs of the Revolution: the elimination of racial discrimination. Reyita's query as to why discriminatory practices are still found in the country is clearly a criticism of the revolutionary society. Reyita's honest assessment of what she has experienced is not censored either by the book's author-editor, her daughter Daisy Rubiera Castillo, by the publisher, or, so it appears, by the government. Such openness concerning this problem could serve to eventually eliminate incidents like the one described above.

Like Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón*, an oral history told by an ex-slave whose life spanned the nineteenth century, Reyita, sencillamente serves as a mirror to major events in Cuba's development as a nation in this century. Although Reyita's experiences include the benefits of the 1959 Revolution, she still has suffered socially and economically primarily because of her color. In her case, the Revolution seems to have improved her situation, but it has not created a colorblind society in which she can live without any fear of discrimination.

The social reality as represented in the three books which have been discussed here--Cofiño's *Cuando la sangre se parece al fuego*, Paz's *El lobo, el bosque, y el hombre nuevo*, and Rubiera Castillo's *Reyita, sencillamente*--certainly does not reflect a perfect society. However, each writer has brought imperfections to light, thereby enabling the reader to perceive what hinders the attainment of social justice for all Cubans. In each book, the characters attempt to resolve conflicts--whether cultural, sexual, or racial--by coming to terms with their environment. Often hostile, their social milieu requires them to adapt to a system in which the common good, not individual benefit, is the norm. Cristino Mora embraces the system, but loses himself in the Party ideology. Without the other part of his identity--the mystical, spiritual side of his African heritage--his personality disintegrates, leaving him an incomplete, conflicted person.

In Paz' book, the two main characters come from different backgrounds. One is heterosexual, the other is homosexual, but both share a belief in the socialist system. The problems that Diego must face are too overwhelming for him, so he must leave the island. However, his friend David sees the injustice in this and, anticipates a future in which each Cuban can live the socialist dream.

María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno represents the triumph over adverse socio-economic conditions. The conflicts in her life were enormous, but she adapted to her environment. She had the power to reconcile the extremely unpleasant conditions in her life and her own ambitions as an Afro-Cuban woman. As a victim of social injustice, she showed no rancor, but rather sought to help her peers. She displays genuine solidarity with the revolutionary cause; but even though the



Revolution changed many aspects of her life for the better, her belief in herself and her family seems to have sustained her for more than ninety years.

In Cuba today, the rights and privileges won for all Cubans in the Revolution of 1959 are still evident. Unfortunately, economic conditions have affected the country to such an extent that it has been difficult to maintain them at the level they were before 1990. If we are to believe the works of writers like Manuel Cofiño, Senel Paz, and Daisy Rubiera Castillo, the ideal revolutionary society, regardless of race, origin, or gender is not yet a reality. Hopefully, in the next century, the term “compañero” will indeed imply “companion, my equal by right and by law.”

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