On the Road to Democracy: Spoken Word Poetry Giving Voice to the Voiceless

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Concerns about the use of poetry and its importance have been addressed through the ages in numerous essays written in “Defense of Poetry”. Whereas Shelly perceived poets as “the unacknowledged legislators of the world”, doubts about poetry and its relevance have been expressed in Dana Gioia’s “Can Poetry Matter?” However, ethnic poets have made poetry matter: by using poetry as a weapon against oppression and marginalization. Statistical surveys of mainstream publishing houses show that: 70% of published books are written by “White” writers, while the remaining 30% is divided among token writers of color. Therefore, the resort to oral performance became inevitable for poets of color. Poetry slams and jams opened up democratic allies for ethnic poets where they can express their political views, maintaining a sense of communal identity.

Similarly, in the Egyptian context with censorship, political, economical, and social oppression under a corrupt regime poets reverted to spoken word. Egyptian poetry in the late nineties saw a resurgence of oral poetry and poetry performance that expressed opposing political views, making poetry a democratic ground, giving voice to the multiple voiceless as it speaks about their sufferings and frustrations. This paper aims at comparing the revolutionary nature of Spoken Word as reflected in ethnic American and contemporary Egyptian poetry performance. Showing how the political use of poetry as a tool of resistance is the first step on the road to democracy. It will shed light on how the stage has provided a safe niche for poets, as opposed to the restricting page. Furthermore, it will attempt to show how a new generation of performance poets has revitalized poetry bringing it down from the ivory tower of academia into the streets. Finally the implications of this new trend on American and Egyptian culture will be discussed.