

# Echoes of Resilience: The Transformative Power of Poetry During African Slavery

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## Abstract

*This research paper intends to look into the role of poetry as a source of healing and hope for Africans, Who despite of being enslaved, stripped off their identity, freedom and cultural roots takes the courage to turn their verses as means of emotional solace, strength and a way of expressing resistance against oppression.*

*Poetry has always been a part of culture for Africans. We get to see their rich tradition of music and dance being the crux of their identity. It is also an artistic outlet that deeply embed the histories of civilization and their cultures. Through evocative imagery, rhythmic steps and power of storytelling it carried profound symbolism offering comfort, belongingness and remembrance. This paper highlights how their natural ability of oral culture and saying verses helped them in reinstalling confidence about their intrinsic worth and perseverance in the face of brutality, especially in the aftermath of slavery. This write up shows how poetry appears as a transformative force with the examples of writers like Phillis Wheatly, Mahogany L Browne, Rudy Francisco, Langston Hughes, Maya Anjelou, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Claude McKay, Gwendelyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni and others.*

**Keywords:** Slavery, Poetry, Resilience, Hope, Identity, Freedom, Resistance

## Introduction

Poetry, throughout literary history has served more than just an artistic expression. It has been a vital component that exhibits survival, resistance, healing in facing various adversities. Poetry has the ability to articulate the unspeakable, give voice to voiceless, create sense of belongingness, expressing the shared experiences in most isolating circumstances. Especially when we see that the spoken mode of communication are suppressed, poetry becomes a unique yet powerful mode of expression that preserves memory, transmits knowledge and fosters hope. Poetry has also proved to have offered solace, ignited courage and lead as an important tool for social change across cultures and eras.

The beauty of poetry is with rich symbolism, powerful language that allows complex emotions and ideas to be conveyed in the ways that resonate deeply with human spirit, making it potential healing force during times of crisis as well as sphere to open up about the trauma and various ways of oppressions.

If we look back in the history, we acknowledge African slave trade as the sad and shameful part of humanity, wherein people were forcibly uprooted in millions from their homelands. Later they

were subjugated to unimaginable sufferings and systematic dehumanization. Enslaved Africans were taken away from their families, language, cultural practices, and identities. The institution of slavery led to the raise of crucial question on the African past, present and extinguished the hope for future.

It instilled fear leading to suppression of African cultural expressions. Despite these oppressive conditions Africans clung to their cultural heritage, adapting and transforming it in the face of relentless adversities. This resilience manifested in various forms that includes the creative form of expression that is, poetry. The poems penned by various African poets born out of pain and longing became a powerful testament enduring spirit of generation who determined to survive and who struggled to grow beyond the clutches of slavery.

### **Objective**

1. To know the importance of history and validation of poetry as a component of resistance and resilience.
2. To look into the excerpts from poems written by African poets which speak about oppression and poetry as a healer of trauma.

### **Methodology**

This research adapts qualitative and analytical research to understand the role of poetry in times of difficulty especially challenges like racial oppression and slavery.

### **Findings**

Most of the poems brings in the general audience to understand the emotional trauma faced by the Africans then and a continued baggage that the racial oppression faces even till today in various parts of the world. At the same time poetry as a strong medium of marginalised representation of those who has underwent oppression in various circumstances find solace as a mode of healing and instrument for instilling the hope.

The poetry of enslaved Africans has had a profound and lasting influence on subsequent generations of African American poets. Poets like Phillis Wheatley, commonly regarded as the first published African American poet, drew on the tradition of earlier slave poets, writing about freedom, identity, and social justice. Subsequent poets, including Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, and Audre Lorde and many more, drew on the rich tradition of slave poetry, using their own voices to challenge racism, sexism, and other oppressions.

Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784), kidnapped from West Africa and enslaved in Boston, she is one of the earliest published African American poets, combined classical forms of European poetry with her own view as a slave. In her poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America," Wheatley speaks about the pain inherent in slavery as well as claims the spiritual equality of Black individuals: "Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain, / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train" (Wheatley 13, Poems on Various Subjects). Though limited by the social conventions of white culture, Wheatley's compositions secretly defied the prevailing ideas of Black inferiority. Her collection, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), won international acclaim and challenged widespread racist assumptions about the intellectual capacities of enslaved persons. Although many of Wheatley's poems were neoclassical in style, they often dealt with religious, moral, and nature-related themes. There are critics who have claimed that her writing did not directly address slavery itself, but her very being a published poet defied the institution.

Jupiter Hammon born 1711 died around 1806 was an enslaved Long Island New Yorker who penned African American poetry early on in American colonial history. Hammon's poems delve

deeply into religious themes reflecting his profound faith and belief in spiritual salvation. His most famous work “An Address to Negroes in State of New-York” (1787) strongly urged enslaved people embrace Christianity and advocate for gradual emancipation. Hammon’s poem subtly critiques slavery beneath surface level language and makes a powerful moral reform. His work mirrors complexities of enslaved individuals finding solace in spirituality amidst harsh circumstances of their daily existence.

George Moses Horton (c.1798-1883) known as Colored Bard of North Carolina was first African American publishing a book of poetry in Southern United States.. Horton born into bondage learned without guidance mastering literacy skills and earned acclaim through his poetry. Horton’s poetry explicitly tackled slavery’s dark injustices amidst his deeply felt yearning for liberation. His collection *The Hope of Liberty* (1829) reflects his deep-seated yearning for freedom through education. Poignant lines like “Come melting Pity from afar and break this iron cruel bar” in his poem *Slavery* evoke anguish of enslaved people yearning desperately for freedom.

The Harlem Renaissance, a vibrant cultural movement of the 1920s and 1930s, was a milestone in African American literary history. African American poetic forms have evolved and diversified over time, reflecting the changing social and cultural landscape of the United States. From the spirituals and work songs of the slavery era to the blues poetry of the Harlem Renaissance to the spoken word poetry of today, African American poets have constantly innovated and experimented with new forms of expression. This evolution has been driven by a desire to capture the complexities of the African American experience .

The period witnessed an explosion of creative output, with black writers, artists, and musicians celebrating their heritage and challenging racial stereotypes. Poets Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay wrote about racial identity, social injustice, and the beauty of black culture. The Harlem Renaissance gave a foundation to generations of African American poets by opening a platform for black voices to be heard and by affirming the value of black experiences. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s resulted in a new generation of African American poetry that spoke out against racial segregation and discrimination. Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, and Sonia Sanchez, among others, used their poetic voice to condemn injustice, promote equality, and promote black pride. Often, their poems were a call to action, urging readers to challenge the prevailing social order and fight for change in society. Civil Rights poetry was instrumental in raising the African American cause and garnering support for the movement.

Harlem Renaissance witnessed the development of blues and jazz poetry, with Langston Hughes at the forefront, initiating the employment of rhythmic and musical aspects to articulate the day-to-day struggles and joys of people. In “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes connects the African American experience with an intense ancestral heritage: “I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins” (Hughes 4, *The Weary Blues*). Employing rivers as metaphors for survival and historical continuity, Hughes highlights the strength of Black identity during the period of long oppression. In “Mother to Son,” Hughes employs motherly wisdom to indicate the concept of perseverance: “Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair” (Hughes 2, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*). This poem is employed to reassure readers that challenges must be encountered with resolution. Likewise, “I, Too” offers a vision of racial equality and steadfast hope: “Tomorrow, / I’ll be at the table / When company comes” (Hughes 16-18, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*).

Poets Nikki Giovanni and Amiri Baraka adopted free verse and political content during the Black Arts and Civil Rights Movements to call for justice. Nikki Giovanni writes a great deal about identity, resistance, and racial trauma. “Black love is Black wealth and they’ll / probably talk about my hard childhood / and never understand that / all the while I was quite happy” (Giovanni 22-25,

The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni) refers to her reflections on growing up Black in America in Nikki-Rosa, rejecting stereotypes about Black suffering.

By highlighting the value of community in spite of hardship, this poem questions popular accounts of Black pain. Giovanni addresses racial injustice head-on in *The True Import of Present Dialogue*, calling for resistance with the line, “Black love is Black riches / and they’ll probably talk about my terrible childhood” (Giovanni 17-18, *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgment*).

Her assertive tone reclaims Black identity, countering historical narratives of dehumanization. “I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal / I cannot be grasped / except by my consent” (Giovanni 12-14, *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni*) is a line from her work *Ego Tripping* that honors African heritage and resiliency. Her strong tone challenges historical myths of dehumanization and reclaims Black identity.

The emotional toll of Black survival under racism is also revealed in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s lyric *We Wear the Mask*: “We wear the mask that grins and lies, / It covers our cheeks and shades our eyes” (Dunbar 1-2, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*). His writings serve as an example of how poetry offered a way to express unseen suffering and group perseverance.

Baraka’s *Somebody Blew Up America* is a scathing critique of institutionalized racism and atrocities of the past, replete with urgent, interrogative lines: “Who killed Malcolm, Kennedy & his Brother? / Who killed Dr. King?” (Baraka 72, *Somebody Blew Up America and Other Poems*). His in-your-face style reflects the increasing radicalization of the Black Arts Movement, employing poetry as protest and resistance.

Poetry was important for the capacity of enslaved individuals to survive trauma, to articulate their suffering, and to sustain hope. Maya Angelou’s poem “Still I Rise” is a prime example of affirmation of resilience in the midst of historical oppression: “You may write me down in history / With your bitter, twisted lies, / You may trod me in the very dirt / But still, like dust, I’ll rise” (Angelou 1-4, *And Still I Rise*). The assertive tone that Angelou employs transforms experiences of suffering as a testimony to victory, thereby affirming the healing power of poetry in generating endurance against systemic oppression.

One of Angelou’s signature poems, “Phenomenal Woman,” challenges traditional beauty ideals and encourages self-confidence: “I’m a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That’s me” (Angelou 31-34, *Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women*). The poem encourages self-worth and self-empowerment, especially for women who are members of oppressed groups. In “Caged Bird,” Angelou contrasts the freedom of an untethered bird with the anguish of a caged bird, as an allegory of racial oppression: “The caged bird sings / with a fearful trill / of things unknown / but longed for still” (Angelou 31-34, *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*). This evocative image of hope under oppression speaks deeply to readers who are oppressed.

Now the Contemporary African American poets continue to grapple with the legacies of slavery and the long-term effect of slavery’s impact on black individuals. Rita Dove, Natasha Trethewey, and Terrance Hayes, for example, navigate concerns of historical trauma, race identity, and yearning for healing and reconciliation. They look backward, recalling their ancestors and seeking to understand the complicities of their past. Through confronting the less than pleasant facts of history, these poets seek to engage their audience, stimulate sympathy, and make their contribution to creating an even more just and equitable society. Contemporary African American poets highlight the importance of confronting the legacies of trauma (Alansary).

Contemporary poets struggle with matters of racial identity, social justice, and cultural heritage, often tackling subjects such as police brutality, mass incarceration, and economic disparity. Academic literature on this topic has highlighted the utilization of poetry as a tool of resistance, healing, and empowerment within the Black community. Contemporary scholarly debate also

speaks of the influence of numerous literary and cultural movements on Afro-American poetry, including the Black Arts Movement, the spoken word phenomenon, and hip-hop culture. The intersection of race with gender, sexuality, and class is also a dominant theme, laying bare the complexity inherent in Afro-American lived realities.

Likewise, Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask" illustrates the dualism of the psychological state of Black people in the face of racism: "We wear the mask that grins and lies, / It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes" (Dunbar 1-2, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*). His poetry represents the best of how poetry is a tool of portraying concealed suffering and collective strength.

In Claude McKay's poem "If We Must Die," the problem of racial violence is confronted directly through an imperative call to resistance: "Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack, / Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!" (McKay 13-14, *Harlem Shadows*). Written during the Red Summer of 1919, this poem captures the unyielding spirit which poetry provided to African Americans suffering racial terror.

Gwendolyn Brooks, who was the first African American to receive the Pulitzer Prize, eloquently conveys the struggles of urban Black life in her poem, *The Bean Eaters*: "They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair. / Dinner is a casual affair" (Brooks 1-2, *The Bean Eaters*). With simple but powerful imagery, Brooks brings to the forefront the struggles of economic hardship and resilience, firmly grounding her poetic effort in the real lives of Black populations.

Most recently, Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard* weaves together personal and historical trauma, remembering forgotten Black soldiers of the Civil War: "They'll call this war, / when what I want to call it is murder" (Trethewey 8-9, *Native Guard*). Her poetry concerns erasure and the suffering of African Americans across history, voices speaking out on behalf of the oppressed who are silenced.

## **Conclusion**

Slave poetry has made a lasting impact on African American cultural heritage, influencing the themes, forms, and styles found in African American literature and art. You can see the legacy of slave poetry reflected in the works of numerous African American writers, artists, and musicians, who continue to draw from this rich tradition. The focus on oral storytelling, the clever use of coded language, and a strong commitment to social justice are all defining features of African American culture that trace back to the slavery era. Slave poetry stands as a powerful reminder of the resilience, creativity, and unbreakable spirit of enslaved Africans, who turned their experiences of oppression into art that still resonates today.

The narrative of slave poetry highlights the universal strength of poetry as a means for healing, resistance, and human endurance. Throughout cultures and history, poetry has served as a way to express pain, share hope, and build community in tough times. The powerful verses crafted by enslaved Africans exemplify how poetry can transform suffering into strength, resist oppression, and celebrate the enduring spirit of humanity. Poetry plays a crucial role in preserving native identities and traditions (Abdel-Daem). The legacy of slave poetry inspires anyone who wishes to use their voice to foster a more just and equitable world.

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