Chapter-III

Afro-American Poetry: A Study from the Perspectives of Identity Quest

The painful and tragic experiences of the Afro-Americans in the United States of America led them to struggle for and establish an identity of their own. The survey of the history of the Afro-American people in different geographical spaces such as the African homeland, the middle passage, the American South and then the industrialized North, presents a picture where identity has been the foremost casualty in a history of displacement and migration. They have got engaged in a struggle for survival against unexpected suffering. The tragedy was that the Afro-Americans’ quest for identity began over the things for which they themselves were not responsible, but the factors which were responsible were their color, their race, their ancestors, and their body. All this led the Black man into an object. It is under such circumstances that an unending and always expanding quest for identity began. Both the Afro-American men and women were the victims but there is a marked difference in their approach. While the men had to fight only in terms of race and class, the women were additionally burdened with the issues of gender as they saw that it is not only the White man but also the Black man who often ill-treated them.

Looking back into the history of Afro-Americans, millions of Africans were torn away from their native roots. They were violently transplanted to the hostile environment. They were not seen as people, but objects that could easily be taken and used for the owner’s advantage. The White plantation owners in the South America, who could not endure the rigors of hot sun, the marsh and the mosquitoes, purchased the Blacks to do the works on the field. For them, they were not different from the field animals. So the implanted slaves were divested of their culture, social mores, religion, family identity and even their language. A beast of burden does not have any God or culture- was their belief. They were not allowed to have a sense of self, a sense of individuality or self-worth. They had never been treated as if their lives were of significant worth or value. This resulted in a destructive sense of alienation and depersonalization.
The experience of the Afro-American people, one of the largest ethnic groups in the United States of America today, has been varied, painful and tragic. For this minority group displacement, deprivation, suffering, marginalization, resistance, survival, and an urge to create and assert a sense of identity against the process of marginalization, has been the burden of history. Deprived of any sense of identity or any satisfying feeling of the self, they throughout the centuries have been engaged in attempts to define their existence in definite terms. Their cultural aspiration, as expressed in their literature, seems to revolve round an inevitable urge to reinvent and reassert an identity of their own. This turns out to be their primary quests.

Identity may be thought of in terms of self-personal, group or societal. According to The Oxford Companion to African American Literature, identity as a concept can be defined as the search for self and its relationship to social contexts and realities. Identity is generally defined as the distinct personality of an individual, and the condition or character as to who a person is. Components of identity include a sense of personal continuity and of uniqueness from other people. In addition to carving out a personal identity based on the need for uniqueness, people also acquire a social identity based on their membership in various groups-familial, ethnic, occupational and others. These group identities, in addition to satisfying the need for affiliation, help people define themselves in the eyes of both-others and themselves. The identity of a person is shaped by various factors such as gender, race, class, nationality, culture and generally by the society the person lives in. Identities are constructed on the basis of various traits and experiences. Race and skin are important markers of identity in many societies. This issue is more problematic in the multicultural societies where diversity is not appreciated and the concept of ‘other’ plays a vital role in human life and destiny. How the person is treated, accepted, humiliated or rejected by others have a great impact on the formation of identity of him or her.

The identity of Afro-Americans is shaped in the racist American society which considers them as inferior. There they have been relegated to the lowest and most unwanted jobs. They have faced the evil effects of racial discrimination such as suppression, segregation, humiliation, poverty. Even those who have not been slaves have suffered the
discrimination in the daily interactions with the White society. After all, many people tried their best to abolish slavery and remove discrimination in order to establish democracy in the United States of America. So many anti-slavery movements, clarion call of intellectuals, slave narratives, speeches, and lectures have been held to abolish slavery from both the levels-mental and physical. As the Black community has struggled and endeavored to regain their cultural values since the day first, the community leaders and religious preachers began to encourage the Afro-Americans to recover the ancient cultural and familial values. Some considered education and economic development as the cure of the ills of cultural alienation. Some believed that they could find a self, an individual identity within the framework of White American value system. A few, however, asserted that the Blacks’ incorporation into the majority culture should not be at the cost of their own cultural values.

The African-Americans in their passage through slavery had to struggle to establish a sense of identity, to find a voice, and to claim a political and cultural space in the United States of America. This transit has formed and reinforced an autonomous sense of Black identity. Black literature, music and culture are a testament to that story. Africans were first brought to America as slaves and in this process they were displaced from their native land and culture.

They were hurled into a new land, strange and hostile, where, for a second time they felt the slow, painful process of a new place and as a result of this confronted a concerned attack on a stable sense of identity. They could neither call themselves Africans nor Americans. The institution of slavery, thus, forced on the Afro-Americans a strange culture. Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he had to place himself. His metaphysics, or his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him. In the New World the Negro, not only lost his culture but his very personal name. He was either given a Christian name or the surname of his master so that he could be easily identified that, he belonged to a particular master. The Black, in this process lost his very personal indicator of identity.
The color of the skin is the most obvious outward manifestation of race. So it has been made the criterion by which men are judged irrespective of their social or educational attainments. In the White world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Along with the color of the skin, the physical features like hair, stature also made the life of a Negro miserable. The imperialists of Europe made their profits by making the Black bodies, the big business of the 18th century, which only a few industries of the world could yield. Their hunger for more wealth increased the importation of the Black slaves. But these Europeans, whenever, they saw that the populations of the Black slaves were exceeding the Whites, they transported them to other places. In this process many Black families were broken. The Afro-Americans, thus, lost the sense of a definite kinship. This is the effect of forced migration.

The Africans, transported to this New World also lost their primitive religion. The religion which had helped them together was snatched from them and they were given the new religion of Christianity. The Blacks, to some extent responded as fervently in their call for liberty, equality and fraternity, to the expressed conviction that all men are equal in the eyes of God. But soon they were disillusioned. Their captivity under Christendom blasted their lives, disrupted their families, reached down into the personalities of each one of them. It destroyed the very images and symbols which had guided their minds and feelings in the effort to live. To evade the prevailing Christian injunction that all baptized men are free and equal, they culled from the Bible many quotable verses rebuking the slaves to be true to their masters. They extended Christian salvation to them without granting the boon of freedom. When praises were sung to God, it was enforced that the Blacks must not lift their voices in common hymn.

Each of the White men created an all-powerful atmosphere of ambition and passion in which the Black slaves became the objects of exploitation. To protect their edifice of political power, the lords of the land proceeded to neutralize the strength of the Blacks. They framed one policy: dividing and ruling the Blacks. They ruled over them by inciting them against one another. At this stage division also occurred among the Black communities. One group went against the other and in this process they began to lose their communal identity. Among the Blacks, the exploitation had two dimensions, based
on race and class. The consideration of race was used to create a sense of restlessness and division along the color line. This class considerations enforced among the Black people established a class oriented hierarchy of the ruled and the ruler when a section of the Black laborers were engaged as slave drivers or overseers. This in its turn further destroyed the sense of community life or any possibility of organization of the slaves as a community. This characteristic of colonial feature dominated and contributed to the sufferings of the African-Americans for a long time.

The Afro-Americans were also denied education. Their Black bodies were regarded as good tools that had to be kept efficient for labor and hard work. Therefore, when schools were built, it was decided that the Blacks must not partake of the teaching in the schools. It can be said that the Whites leaped upon the road of progress and their leap was the windfall of the tragedy of the Blacks. Their excessive love of power and prosperity wove a deadly web of slavery. Their sense of the possibility of building more luxurious world brought devastation and despair to the Blacks. The African-American desire to learn, to be able to use language as a tool for emancipation is very poignantly expressed in the Narrative of The Life of Fredrick Douglass, An American Slave, written by himself. Even the Sunday schools were a mere mockery of education to the slaves. The desire to be able to read and use language to articulate grievances has been and still a very significant feature in the Afro-American quest for identity. Frederick Douglass ironically states:

“The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers...As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! That very discontentment with which Master Huge had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unalterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing.”

(Douglass, 35)
That was Frederick Douglass in 1845. But Afro-American history has since then been a struggle to master language and use writing as action in the search to understand and express a sense of the self.

A sense of the past plays an important role in the way values and visions are transmitted from one generation to the next. History is part of a society’s attempt to structure a self image and to communicate a common identity. The African-Americans, unable to assimilate and integrate with the Whites began to look back to their African past. The new American nationality was language- English, ideas and traditions because it was able to melt all the European customs and traditions leaving the Black Americans outside the plate. Their folkways and folktales, which had once given meaning and sanction to their actions, faded from the Black consciousness. They were now no longer the typical Negro nor were they regarded as equal to the sense of identifiable self. This new self increased the multiplicity of simultaneously being an African, an American, and a human being.

The Negro’s search for identity began over the things for which he himself was not responsible. He was not responsible for his black color, for his body, for his race, for his ancestors, but still then he was subjected to crude definition as a mute object. The White men by capturing the Black men from Africa and bringing them to slavery in America killed the Black men-killed him mentally, culturally, spiritually, economically, politically, and morally. Hated from outside and therefore hating himself, the Negro was bound to take him far off from his own presence and contribute to the process of turning himself into an object. All he wanted was to be a man among other men and live in a world that also belonged to him, but it was denied to him. This state led him to an unending quest for identity throughout their life.

In such situation, literature has the power to act as a mind opener and bring consciousness to create new concepts of freedom and equality. Afro-American literature is the best example for this. The Black writers have urged the world for their freedom, equality and justice. Their writings not only depict their experiences of harsh suppression but penetrate the mind of the victims. Their literature uncovers their feelings, dreams and
long-lasting thirst for freedom. It is this aspect of their writings that makes the individual experience a universal one, worthy to read and reread. The characters in their literature experience themselves as wounded or imprisoned by racial and economic divisions within American culture. Commenting on the Black experience in the racist American society, Khem Guragain remarks:

“The boundaries that circumscribe Black people are not only the prejudices and restrictions that bar their entry into the mainstream but the psychological ones they internalize as they develop in a social structure that historically has excluded them.”

(Guragain n. pag.)

In fact, the practice of slavery has made them dehumanized and demonized, made them seem less than human, hence not worthy of humane treatment. In such cruel situation, the literature created by them draws the attention of readers to the issues of freedom and equality, the obvious rights of every human being denied to them for centuries. The Afro-American literature explores and highlights the need for self-identity and self-discovery in American society. The literary figures of all periods focus in the various possibilities for them to obtain their identities.

Afro-American poetry uses the above stated historical forces as the backdrop. For the African-American writers, men and women, it has been unending individual quests as part of the larger quest of the community for a sense of identity. A study of African-American culture and its literary expression of identity are defined by the dimension of race and in some cases class. The Afro-American poetry came to be seen as dominated by the struggle for freedom from all discriminations and also striving to establish one’s identity as an African-American. The writers also portray their protagonists engaged in a quest for identity.

The writings of the African-American women, though runs parallel to the writings of men, have their own particular views—that of gender. The institution of slavery branded them within the narrow scope of certain stereotype images which denied the scope of a fully developed notion of the self. The women saw that, in most cases the slave narrative
or the later day writings of the Black male failed to give a correct picture or expression to the idea of a Black woman. The negative stereotype image of Black woman continued to show its presence in contemporary writings while the other aspects of the Negro life went through a series of change. The African-American women, thus, not only had to fight in terms of race and class but also had to struggle to change the negative images in their real life as well as literature. They seem to give greater importance to community involvement, thus designing more prominent and dominant position for the Afro-American women.

Among the earliest literary figures, a female poet namely Phillis Wheatley holds the prominent place in Afro-American literature. Phillis Wheatley straddled the border between two cultures and two different sources of identity; one that was original and another that was forced and sought to eradicate any trace of personal identity. Born in 1753 in Africa, Wheatley was sold into slavery and brought to Boston at age eight to serve a White family. Although still a slave, she was given a privilege that few White free females of her age were given—an education. She began writing poetry, and had published at age twenty in London. This was a unique circumstance for a young Black girl in America at the time and this tension between her two identities is a main issue in her poems. From the depths of slavery into the world of published authors, it is quite simple to see how Phillis Wheatley would have been at odds with her identity, struggling to make sense of her place in the world.

In *On Being Brought from Africa to America*, Wheatley attributes her submission into slavery as an act of mercy by God. It is clear to her that without becoming a slave and making the awful journey across the Atlantic, she would never have been exposed to Christianity, and instead would have spent her days staying in her ‘pagan land’. However, despite her gratitude for her introduction to Christianity, she warns her critics that although she is of the race of Cain, even her people can be saved and purified through Christ. It seems that although Wheatley is very glad to have lived through the circumstances that brought her to America, there are certain citizens who believe that she should have remained in her place, both as a slave and a pagan. This clear tension between feeling grateful for being exposed to Christianity, especially when juxtaposed
with her horrifying experience of being taken from her native land on a dangerous journey presents the modern reader with several different notions of identity. While Wheatley finds an identity through Christianity, it should not be forgotten that her original identity, even while it may seem to come from a ‘pagan’ land still exists and creates layers of subtle meaning for readers, not to mention a great deal of speculation.

Much of the speculation about the mixed nature of Wheatley’s identity is made more complex in another of her poems *To S.M. A Young African Painter, On Seeing His Works* in which race is an issue but not one that is direct:

“TO show the lab’ring bosom’s deep intent,
   And thought in living characters to paint,
When first thy pencil did those beauties give,
   And breathing figures learnt from thee to live,
How did those prospects give my soul delight,
   A new creation rushing on my sight?
Still, wond’rous youth! each noble path pursue,
   On deathless glories fix thine ardent view:
Still may the painter’s and the poet’s fire
   To aid thy pencil, and thy verse conspire!
And may the charms of each seraphic theme
   Conduct thy footsteps to immortal fame!
…
But when these shades of time are chas’d away,
   And darkness ends in everlasting day.”

(Wheatley n. pag.)

The poem opens with praise for the art of Scipio Moorhead, slave of a Presbyterian minister, who was both an artist and a poet. It was he who drew Wheatley’s portrait which appeared in her book of poems. As a fellow artist, she strives to comprehend the creative process that achieves his purposes and also gives her, as the audience of his work, such pleasure. The artist’s pencil gives life to figures born of his imagination and intent, and the speaker praises the power of imagination which bestows on the painter and
the writer the ability to transcend the limitations of their world. For these two slave artists, those limitations would have been great indeed.

In this poem, Phillis Wheatley communicates that an artist's or poet's pencil brings pictures or words to life. Then, Wheatley writes about how powerful imagination is, because it gives the writer or artist the ability to go beyond their limits, to the point where limitations disappear. Wheatley then describes the poet's and artist's will as 'fire', which helps them to continue to write poetry or paint paintings. She then continues with ‘But when these shades of time are chas'd away, and darkness ends in everlasting day,’ which means that when this era of racism has passed, the darkness (hard times) ends and instead comes never ending- daylight (good times).

Wheatley is so encouraging because she wishes to disprove everyone who considers those lesser than themselves to be worthless. Through this piece, Wheatley is making identity an issue of personal talents and skills rather than one that is based on one's native land or social status in America. This hopeful ideal as expressed by a servant speaks volumes about the nature of American identity at this time because it conveys the spirit that through dedication, one can achieve anything. With this in mind, it is equally important to understand that this is a new concept of identity and interestingly, it is coming from a writer who was surrounded by the suppression of all forms of identity.

Another female poet of slavery era is Frances Harper who also demanded freedom of her fellow people through her poetry. Critics of Harper at the time assert that she was among some of the leading poets in the country at that time that used their works to express their social and political freedom. Frances E. W. Harper entered literary field as a free Black. She witnessed as many problems as freed Blacks still experienced and became an activist in the Abolitionist Movement. She was a free Black living in the North. The brutal murder of the freed man could not have happened at a better time in Harper’s life since she was searching for a way to contribute to her race. In fact, according to some critics, this heinous crime became a major turning point in Harper’s life. Upon that grave, she believed that she pledged herself to the Anti-Slavery cause. Her commitment to the antislavery cause and her writing created a natural mixture. Harper’s attempts to become an anti-slavery worker on an integrated circuit never daunted her spirit, lectures, writings
or her message of equality. Writing pieces of works for abolitionist papers allowed Frances Harper to publish many poems in response to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. One of the best examples of such poems is *Eliza Harris* who is also one of the most important characters of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In this poem, Harper depicts a young mother’s escape through the dense forest to freedom with the bloodhounds on her trails and her baby boy in her arms. To quote a few stanzas of the poem:

“Like a fawn from the arrow, startled and wild,
A woman swept by us, bearing a child;
In her eye was the night of a settled despair,
And her brow was o’ershaded with anguish and care.

She was nearing the river—in reaching the brink,
She heeded no danger, she paused not to think!
For she is a mother—her child is a slave—
And she’ll give him his freedom, or find him a grave!

’Twas a vision to haunt us, that innocent face—
So pale in its aspect, so fair in its grace;
As the tramp of the horse and the bay of the hound,
With the fetters that gall, were trailing the ground!

She was nerved by despair, and strengthen’d by woe,
As she leap’d o’er the chasms that yawn’d from below;
Death howl’d in the tempest, and rav’d in the blast,
But she heard not the sound till the danger was past.

Oh! how shall I speak of my proud country’s shame?
Of the stains on her glory, how give them their name?
How say that her banner in mockery waves—
Her “star-spangled banner”—o’er millions of slaves?

But she’s free!—yes, free from the land where the slave
From the hand of oppression must rest in the grave;
Where bondage and torture, where scourges and chains
Have plac’d on our banner indelible stains.

The bloodhounds have miss’d the scent of her way;
The hunter is rifled and foil’d of his prey;
Fierce jargon and cursing, with clanking of chains,
Make sounds of strange discord on Liberty’s plains.

(Wheatley, 11)

The above-mentioned poem is all about a slave woman who wants to escape so that her son does not become a slave. She even crosses the icy Ohio River without realizing the dangers of it. She made it across the river and was welcomed, ‘Where the friends of humanity open'd their door,’ by the people. She risked danger and death for the freedom of her son and the two ends up making it out of slavery. Harper talks about the fear of slaves escaping and also the shame of her country who lives by liberty. The fear of slaves escaping is shown through her line, ‘The danger was fearful, the pathway was wild.’ Harper really expresses her shame for her country by saying, ‘Oh! How shall I speak of my proud country's shame? Of the stains on her glory, how give them their name?’ This mother went through anything and everything to provide the best life possible for her child, extreme danger, poverty, and even death. She uses the line, ‘The life of her heart, the child of her breast,’ to show that this mother really had nothing else to live for other than to give her son the life he deserved. She would rather risk dying and setting him free than doing absolutely nothing and both of them still be in slavery. Here is a mother made her way to freedom with her son, panting, scared, with the backing of the hounds behind, clanking of the chains and the thoughts of not her own but her son’s impending bondage. The way Harper sets the poem up brings different elements of reality in regard to the horrors of slavery and the mindset of those enslaved. This poem really shows that how slaves lived during the age of slavery. This poem comes from someone who lived during the time and really shows how horrible slavery was. It describes the way mother and children were separated; husbands and wives were also parted by the merciless slave owners. The miserable feelings felt by the slave’s wife when she comes to know that she
is not going to stay with her husband are very well presented by Harper in the following poem *The Fugitive’s Wife*:

“It was my sad and weary lot
To toil in slavery;
But one thing cheered my lowly cot-
My husband was with me.

One evening, as our children played
Around our cabin door,
I noticed on his brow a shade
I've never seen before.

And in his eyes a gloomy night
Of anguish and despair;
I gazed upon their troubled light,
To read the meaning there.

He strained me to his heaving heart-
My own beat wild with fear;
I knew not, but I sadly felt
There must be evil near.

He vainly strove to cast aside
The tears that fell like rain:-
Too frail, indeed, is manly pride
To strive with grief and pain.

Again he clasped me to his breast,
And said that we must part:
I tried to speak—but, oh! it seemed
An arrow reached my heart.

"Bear not," I cried, "unto your grave,
The yoke you've borne from birth,
No longer live a helpless slave,  
The meanest thing on earth!"  

(Harper n. pag.)

Here the narrator points out that the one thing that comforted her through slavery was the fact her husband was with her. She starts noticing her husband was looking and acting differently and having to hold back tears because of his pride. Then, she knew something was going on, something ‘evil’. The husband soon tells her that they must part and she says he should no longer live a helpless slave. In this poem, Harper is trying to express how hard it was to be the wife of a fugitive. She shows the anguish that the wife goes through knowing that something evil was going on with her husband, something that ultimately would be very upsetting. This very upsetting wave that comes upon the narrator after the husband said they should part is shown by the quote, ‘I tried to speak—but oh! it seemed an arrow reached my heart’. This quote really shows that slaves are human. Many times in the slavery era, slaves were not even looked at as humans. They were seen as property. But this line shows that slaves are just as much human as White people and they have just as many feelings as the slave owners. It shows that a husband to a slave was loved just as much and maybe more than a husband to a White person. At the end of the poem, the wife again shows that she cares so much for her husband by crying, although she understands that her husband has to leave. Through this poem, one can notice how the slaves’ identities were crushed by their cruel masters. For this reason, they used to flee away in order to lead a dignified and safe life. They used to make some secret plans for running away without the knowledge of their master. In a poem The Tennessee Hero, Harper shows how they used to help one another to get a permanent rid of their cruelty even at the cost of losing their life. To quote a few stanzas of the poem:

“He stood before the savage throng,  
The base and coward crew;  
A tameless light flashed from his eye,  
His heart beat firm and true.

…
“Now tell us,” said the savage troop,
“And life thy gain shall be!
Who are the men that plotting, say—
‘They must and will be free!’”

…
They brought the hateful lash and scourge,
With murder in each eye.
But a solemn vow was on his lips—
He had resolved to die.

…
Yes, rather than betray his trust,
He'd meet a death of pain;
'Twas sweeter far to meet it thus
Than wear a treason stain!”

(Harper n. pag.)

This poem is about a slave who has heard fellow slaves plotting to be free. The ‘hero’ is put before White men and told he must tell of these slaves plotting for freedom and he can live. The slave stands true to his fellow people and refuses to give away the secret. Even though he knew he would die if he did not tell, he still stood by his fellow slaves and took the punishment rather than telling. He was beaten many times, but kept true to his band until he died from the torture. In this poem, the ‘hero’ was very brave. He withstood much punishment and death to be true to his fellow slaves who were trying to be free. Harper indicates how much slaves had respect for other slaves and how much drive they have to be free. By the hero standing up for his fellow slaves, this shows how much slaves longed for freedom and this man sacrificed his life just so the others’ could have the freedom that he so longed for. Also, the slaves have a very strong base religion and most of them take the mental approach to it, by singing and believing in God and that he will one day set them free. The hero, though, took a physical approach to religion. He thought the life after would be more appealing, so he sacrificed himself to go to a bigger and better place. He believed it was a win-win situation, that he would go on to a better place and also that the ones who wanted to live and try to escape would ultimately be
happier because of what he did. He trusted in his religion so much, that he was willing to take the pain and torture to go on to the next life and be a happier person. Here is a courageous man who would go through so much pain and torture in order to free his fellow men.

George Moses Horton was a poet from North Carolina who lived most of his life in slavery. Horton was the first slave to publish anti-slavery poetry; the first Black American to publish a book in the South; the only enslaved person to earn a living as a poet; and the only known poet in American history to produce a book of poems before he was able to write. Horton’s life reveals aspects of slavery that were rare yet important parts of the institution, such as virtual freedom, hiring one’s own time, and slave entrepreneurship. Since most people who wrote poetry about slavery were not enslaved, Horton’s poems on this subject provide a rare opportunity to examine the institution from the perspective of a slave. Many of Horton’s experiences were also common within slavery such as: seeking literacy and greater knowledge when there were few opportunities for education; attempting to purchase his freedom from an owner who refused to sell; and constantly yearning to be free. Such yearning is very well presented in the following lines of the poem:

“Come Liberty, thou cheerful sound,
Roll through my ravished ears!
Come, let my grief in joys be drowned,
And drive away my fears.

Say unto foul oppression, Cease:
Ye tyrants rage no more,
And let the joyful trump of peace,
Now bid the vassal soar.

…

Oh, Liberty! thou golden prize,
So often sought by blood—
We crave thy sacred sun to rise,
The gift of nature’s God!

Bid Slavery hide her haggard face,
And barbarism fly:
I scorn to see the sad disgrace
In which enslaved I lie.

Dear Liberty! upon thy breast,
I languish to respire;
And like the Swan unto her nest,
I’d like to thy smiles retire.

Oh, blest asylum—heavenly balm!
Unto thy boughs I flee—
And in thy shades the storm shall calm,
With songs of Liberty!”

(Horton n. pag.)

This poem is different and has a deeper emotional protest because of his experiences as a slave and his endurance of the hostility towards the Afro-American Slaves. He challenges the idea that some people are born to be slaves and others are not, which he strongly protests against with the use of emotive language. His use of imagery through the bird is important as it symbolizes the freedom that the bird has. He explores the theme of slavery and how slaves are restricted and contained rather than be free. Horton’s emotive language illustrates the harsh lives of slaves and how the only way to be free and escape pain is through death, ‘Oh, Heaven! and there no relief/This side the silent grave’. He uses personification of ‘liberty’ and ‘slavery’ to emphasis the aim for all the slaves, the aim to be free and not being controlled by someone else. He repeats the word ‘liberty’ to highlight the facts that the slaves want to have liberty but how it is impossible for them. Horton’s agony and suffering are clearly indicated throughout the poem, which makes this poem effective and very powerful. On Liberty and Slavery is a plea for freedom for all slaves.

Another Afro-American poet of that age is James Whitefield whose poetry also sang songs of freedom for the slaves. He was born in New Hampshire as a free Afro-American. His poetry attracted the attention of the famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass. In 1853 Whitfield published America and Other Poems. Although the book
was not sold in bulk initially, it was critically successful. One of most appealing poem of this collection *America* is a bitter and ironic analysis of slavery of a ‘free’ nation:

America, it is to thee,
Thou boasted land of liberty,-
It is to thee I raise my song,
Thou land of blood, and crime, and wrong.
It is to thee, my native land,
From whence has issued many a band
To tear the black man from his soil,
And force him here to delve and toil;
Chained on your blood-bemoistened sod,
Cringing beneath a tyrant's rod,
Stripped of those rights which Nature's God
Bequeathed to all the human race,
Bound to a petty tyrant's nod,
Because he wears a paler face.
Was it for this, that freedom's fires
Were kindled by your patriot sires?
Was it for this, they shed their blood,
On hill and plain, on field and flood?

(Whitefield n. pag.)

Here Whitefield has expressed his anger for the betrayal at the hands of America for their hypocrisy. It is their self-congratulatory image as the ‘land of the free.’ The poet mocks at the hypocrisy of American ideology. On one hand, they propagate their ideas like ‘life, liberty and pursuit of happiness’ in their Declaration of Independence and on the other hand they sanction the crime of inhuman slavery. The poet raises some basic questions to the White gentry whether their land is full of liberty or full of humiliations caused to the Black people by them by bringing them from their native land for their selfish purpose. They snatched them from their native soil to be used them as tools to till the tobacco, rice, sugar-cane and cotton plantation. They built their powerful empires framing tight
ideological webs of their right to domination. They shackled millions of them to labor for them, to enable them to earn maximum profit. They snatched their rights of living life independently by bringing them into a foreign land without seeking their consent. Though they shed their blood for seeking freedom, they were relegated to animal-life. Further the poet says:

“Oh no; they fought, as they believed,
For the inherent rights of man;
But mark, how they have been deceived
By slavery's accursed plan.
They never thought, when thus they shed
Their heart's best blood, in freedom's cause.
That their own sons would live in dread,
Under unjust, oppressive laws:
That those who quietly enjoyed
The rights for which they fought and fell.”

(Whitefield n. pag.)

The poet in the above lines says that the Blacks did their best efforts for their freedom. They urged their masters to allow them to go back to their native place. They presented to them their demand of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Their masters used to become furious when they heard the words life ‘freedom’. They demanded this because they did not want their children to lead such hellish life ‘under unjust, oppressive laws’. It was their fight for attaining lost identity, but their efforts proved to be worthless under ‘slavery’s accursed plan. It was their strategy to keep the slaves with them at any cost, so that they did not need to go to fields in the hot sun. So whenever they raised their voice for freedom, the White masters used to whip them. Richard Wright quotes in this reference:

“And we black tools responded as fervently as did the best as did rest of mankind to the call of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, to the expressed conviction that all men were equal in the sight of God.
Fury swept the hearts of the Lords of the Land who heard spilling from the thick, black lips of their tools the first broken syllables of freedom, the first stammered assertions of manhood. The foundations of their world trembled and they turned their eyes to God, seized whips, knives or guns, the rushed forth, bellowing to set aright the order of universe”

(Wright, 10)

Richard Wright means to tell that whenever the Blacks murmured words like ‘freedom’, the ‘Lords of the Land’ acted against them with whips and hatred to protect their God-sanctioned civilization. They defended the slavery on some religious grounds and thus used to convince the slaves that the slavery is a God-sanctioned system and it was their duty to uphold it. For them, the slaves were Black tools that had to be kept efficient for ‘toil’. Therefore when schools were built it was decreed that the slaves were not supposed to go for education. Because the White masters were afraid that if the Black pursued education, then they might claim for their independent identity. When prayers were sung to God, it was decided that they must not lift their voices in common hymn. Husbands and wives were not allowed to stay together. Children were separated from their parents. It was indeed a heart-rending situation when they were parted for one another. In the further part of the poem, Whitefield cries out:

“The fervent prayer of the oppressed;
The cry of helpless infancy
Torn from the parent's fond caress
By some base tool of tyranny,
And doomed to woe and wretchedness;
The indignant wail of fiery youth,
Its noble aspirations crushed,
...
The cry of fathers, mothers, wives,
Severed from all their hearts hold dear,
And doomed to spend their wretched lives
This is how the slaves were made indigent and helpless. Separation brought isolation and despair to the enslaved Afro-Americans. It also caused to them the mental and emotional torment. The whips were always carried as a means of oppression and control, and were regularly used on those slaves who stepped out of line. It was their ‘tyranny’ which filled in their life with ‘wretchedness’, ‘gloom’, ‘doubt’, ‘hate’, ‘fear’. In such tormenting situation, they used to pray to Almighty to shower blessings on them so that they can redeem themselves from such adverse situations. The poet presents such fervent plea made by them to the Lord in his another poem *Prayer of the Oppressed*:

“Oh great Jehovah! God of love,
Thou monarch of the earth and sky,
Canst thou from thy great throne above
Look down with an unpitying eye?

See Afric’s sons and daughters toil,
Day after day, year after year,
Upon this blood-bemoistened soil,
And to their cries turn a deaf ear?

…

How long shall Slavery's iron grip,
And Prejudice's guilty hand,
Send forth, like blood-hounds from the slip,
Foul persecutions o'er the land?

How long shall puny mortals dare
To violate thy just decree,
And force their fellow-men to wear
The galling chain on land and sea?

…
When the bright sun of liberty
Shall shine o'er each despotic land,
And all mankind, from bondage free,
Adore the wonders of thy hand.”

(Whitefield n.pag.)

The poet has made a fervent plea to the God for releasing them from their chains so that they can enjoy their liberty and regain their identity. Their cries are unheard by their oppressors, because they are deaf and dumb to their despair. They are ‘regardless of the slave’s distress’ and ‘unmindful of the black man’s chains’. The poet is asking a question to the Lord that for how much period of time they are going to live such hellish life. When will they be relieved from their shackles? For how long they would go on bearing such unpleasant experience under the cruel masters? This is how the poet prays the God to relive them from their pitiful conditions. One another notable poet of the same age, C.W. Chestnutt also prayed to the God for the freedom of slaves. He imagined such kind of world in which everybody is considered equal. To quote a few lines of his poem The Web of Circumstances in which such urge is expressed:

“When the cycle of years has rolled around, there is to be another golden age, when all men will dwell together in love and harmony, and when peace and righteousness shall prevail for a thousand years. God speed the day and let not the shining thread of hope become so enmeshed in the web of circumstances that we lose sight of it; but but give us here and there, and now and then, some little foretaste of this golden age, that we may the more
patiently and hopefully
await its coming.”

(Chestnutt, 49)

The poet here expresses his inner most desire of being free. He also shares his desire of a society where everybody feels secured and lives with one another with ‘love and harmony’. He wishes a society where ‘peace and righteousness shall prevail’. The poet does not want momentary bliss to prevail, but he wishes it to prevail for ‘thousands years’. He also urges the God to pick up the speed to realize this as early as possible. The poet also desires that once all the things get settled, then the sinful acts by the Whites must not get repeated by them. They should be granted permanent liberty.

This is how these Black writers started addressing to the Black men and about Black men in their poetry. Their poetry is neither satiric nor full of curses, it is awakening to consciousness. Having been insulted and enslaved, they began picking up the word ‘Black’ proudly which was thrown at him like a stone. The Afro-American writer in post-slavery era drew himself erect and proudly proclaimed himself a Black man, face to face with White men. W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the first African Americans to foster the idea of race-consciousness and of the Afro-American as hero. His life’s work focused on the rebuttal of the claim that the African race engendered only slaves and savages unable to make contributions to civilization and American culture. His famous poem *The Song of the Smoke* clearly stands as an affirmation for Afro-Americans, but it is also a proclamation to America as a whole of the historical and economic significance of Afro-Americans. The poet says:

“I am the Smoke King
I am black!
I am swinging in the sky,
I am wringing worlds awry;
I am the thought of the throbbing mills,
I am the soul of the soul-toil kills,
Wraith of the ripple of trading rills;
Up I’m curling from the sod,
I am whirling home to God;
I am the Smoke King
I am black.

…
Wedding the toil of toiling climes,
Shedding the blood of bloodless crimes

…
I will be black as blackness can—
The blacker the mantle, the mightier the man!

…
Hail to the smoke king,
Hail to the black.”

(Du Bois n. pag.)

The poet tells a narrative about one who is the Smoke King and who frequently calls himself a Black. The poem portrays that the Smoke King, himself, is also much more than just one person as the poem refers to the sorrows of many different people. In general, the Smoke King represents the sorrows of the Afro-American community and its struggle to gain civil rights. This is clearly seen as the Smoke King, who constantly refers to himself as Black, embodies many sorrows known to afflict Afro-Americans. Smoke by itself doesn't cause much disorder. With this in mind, Du Bois is not urging Blacks to destroy the current social environment by tearing down its philosophies and principles. Instead, he believes that like smoke, the Blacks have a great presence. But why is he a smoke king? Perhaps, he might be the descendant of the ones who have died in the turmoil of the past. Dubois seems to recognize the pain and tribulation of his forefathers that still rests in the air like a misty residue. He never wants anyone to forget that he and his race had a glorious past and the smoky crown that he proudly wears. The poem *The Song of the Smoke*, published more than forty years after the end of slavery, shows readers how little had changed in society since Blacks had been freed. At the same time, it showed progress in the very fact that a Black writer could speak so freely and intelligently about the oppression of his race.
The mention of the mills indicates the manual labor endured by the Black race over time. The throbbing of those mills does not thrive without the Blackness or the Black presence. In the following line, ‘I am soul of the soul toil kills’ rings to be one of the most thoughtful and significant. Here, Du Bois seems to be introducing the idea of the plight that African-Americans have endured over the years. On the other hand, instead of assuming a negative or victimized perspective and resting there, he appears to rise above the dark side of the truth. References to suffering such as ‘Shedding the blood of bloodless crimes’ mean to tell that many difficulties African Americans faced throughout American history. Furthermore, lines such as ‘I am whirling home to God’ have a slightly more literal meaning as they depict how Afro-Americans kept faith of improving their status in society by staying close to god. It shows how Afro-Americans became mentally tough because of their maltreatment in the United States. This thoroughly depicts how Afro-American citizens were treated during the time of American history. He does not want to evoke anger or an uprising, but he wants to pay homage to those who have already gone up in smoke. The last two lines demonstrate that very well: ‘Hail to the smoke king! / Hail to the black!’ The poem is understood as an affirmation of Black pride, but Du Bois's ultimate acceptance of the need to call for Black pride was the culmination of a difficult process. The poem presents the image of a defiant Black man, expressing his ideas clearly about the oppression of his race while simultaneously embracing his Black identity. In another poem My Country ‘Tis of Thee, one can find Du Bois fighting for racial identity. The central idea he presents in this poem is to be accepting and treating all equally. The poet calls everyone to rise above slavery and other prejudices. The poet was the co-founder of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). This portrays his feelings towards equality that is presented in this poem. The poet says:

“My country tis of thee,
Late land of slavery,
Of thee I sing.
Land where my father’s pride
Slept where my mother died,
From every mountain side
Let freedom ring!

My native country thee
Land of the slave set free,
Thy fame I love.
I love thy rocks and rills
And o’er thy hate which chills,
My heart with purpose thrills,
To rise above.

Let laments swell the breeze
And wring from all the trees
Sweet freedom’s song.
Let laggard tongues awake,
Let all who hear partake,
Let Southern silence quake,
The sound prolong.

Our fathers’ God to thee
Author of Liberty,
To thee we sing
Soon may our land be bright,
With Freedom’s happy light
Protect us by Thy might,
Great God our King.”

(Du Bois n. pag.)

The title *My Country 'Tis of Thee* indicates a possible sense of national pride and support for America. It suggests that the main subject of the poem is the United States. At the same time it appears to be sarcastic. Du Bois is mocking America's inability to create racial equality. He is not proud to be considered an American when racial inequality still exists. This poem is a version of the song *My Country 'tis of Thee* by a renowned
American author Samuel Francis Smith, but the poet changes some of the words to include information of America's history of slavery. This shows how Du Bois is proud of the country for overcoming slavery but he also is mocking America's attitude of freedom. It demonstrates his passion for America's natural beauty when he says, ‘I love thy rocks and rills.’ There was slavery, death, and injustice in that country. Even with the hate and racial injustice, the poet wishes everyone to be the bigger man. The line ‘Let Southern silence quake, the sound prolong’ refers to racism in the Southern America, which prevented the racial equality that Du Bois wished for. Through the line ‘Let laggard tongues awake’ the poet further wishes to let the truth emerge and the Southern injustices be silenced. Du Bois is calling out to evolve passion for equal rights in the people. He also hopes that the God will protect them in the end. That is very well expressed in the line ‘Our fathers' God to thee Author of Liberty.’ Du Bois sees God as the ‘Author of Liberty’ and is saying that the God is the only one who can make rule. He knows that God opposes racism.

The whole poem is a symbol of how the United States is based on freedom, yet had slaves for many years. Du Bois refers to America as the ‘Late land of slavery’ as he also sounds very hopeful for future generations to come. Du Bois agrees with this in his poem but he also suggests that African-Americans have not obtained this liberty and freedom that Whites have enjoyed for so long. Du Bois illustrates the struggles many African-American's faced in fighting for equality and equal rights. This poem is significant because it shows how Blacks felt towards the prospering age in America. Du Bois suggests that the fight for equality is a long-lasting struggle but that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Another notable figure in a post-slavery era was Paul Laurence Dunbar. He was often regarded as the people’s poet. Through writing poetry he gained national prominence. Although Dunbar’s scope was limited by the pressures of time, his contribution to Afro-American poetry is considerable. He proved that a Black writer could be a popular success and could support for bringing freedom to his people with his pen. In the current upsurge of his poetry, he reflects Black life, Black rhythms and Black identity. His parents separated shortly after his birth, but Dunbar could draw on their stories of
plantation life and sing the songs of freedom throughout his writing career. Dunbar also encouraged his fellow Black Americans to maintain their dignity and pride through the racial abuse that they encounter everyday of their lives. Such feelings are expressed in his poem *Ode to Ethiopia*. He says:

“O Mother Race! to thee I bring
This pledge of faith unwavering,
This tribute to thy glory.
I know the pangs which thou didst feel,
When Slavery crushed thee with its heel,
With thy dear blood all gory.

Sad days were those—ah, sad indeed!
But through the land the fruitful seed
Of better times was growing.
The plant of freedom upward sprung,
And spread its leaves so fresh and young—
Its blossoms now are blowing.”

(Dunbar n. pag.)

The poet mainly speaks about the accomplishments that Black Americans have done and the poet urges his fellow Blacks to maintain their pride despite racial abuse. The poet describes Ethiopia as being the mother of all Afro-Americans from where they were brought to slavery, but coming up there they rose up to liberty and freedom. Though African-Americans struggled through the issues of racism, Dunbar articulated this poem in a way that gave courage to this fellow Black Americans. Within the poem, Dunbar expresses his encouragement to the other Afro-Americans by stating that they should be proud of themselves and of their race even though others may show otherwise towards them. Such feelings are expressed by him in the further part of the poem:

“Be proud, my Race, in mind and soul;
Thy name is writ on Glory's scroll
In characters of fire.
No other race, when free again,  
Forgot the past and proved them men  
So noble in forgiving.  

Go on and up! Our souls and eyes  
Shall follow thy continuous rise;  
Our ears shall list thy story  
From bards who from thy root shall spring,  
And proudly tune their lyres to sing  
Of Ethiopia's glory.”

(Dunbar n. pag.)

The poet urges his fellow men to feel proud and be happy with what they have gained till now. Though their painful past is unforgettable to them, they should carve out a new path to tread upon to create a new identity. This is how Dunbar has recorded many accomplishments of Black Americans. With positive and encouraging voice, Dunbar has portrayed the feeling of depression and the yearning for freedom. The yearning for freedom was introduced on the very last line of the poem. This poem stood out to be one of the many great poems written by Paul Laurence Dunbar because of the praise and reassurance the poem consists of.

The Afro-American poets like Dunbar believed that marginalized people should refute the idea that they are inferior. They also believed that through their art, literature and other means of creativity, they should make those people realize their true identity, because they not only have a rich cultural heritage but they are also a part and parcel of their national history. They are truly a part of America’s rich and diverse culture and comprise human resource of that nation. For this reason, they should live with all dignity and pride. Marcus Garvey motivates his lot in the following lines of his short poem Get Up and Go:

“Please clear the way and let me pass,  
If you intend to give up here:
It seems a shame that you should yield
Your life without its fullest share.
Get up! You broken bits of flesh!
Take courage and go fighting on;
For every black man there's a day,
Which pride in race has well begun.
Get up my man and do the "stuff"
That leads to blazing glory's fame:
Hold on, and be like good Macduff,
And damn the man who'd foil your name.”

(Garvey n.pag.)

In the above-mentioned poem, Garvey wishes his fellow people to clear the way and go high up. In the mission of creating a new identity in a foreign land, they must not give up. If so happens, then Garvey says it would be a great shame for them. He wants everyone to be courageous and spirited to go forward in their mission. The poet urges everyone to wake up from their long slumber and suffering and do something worthwhile for the sake of shaping their meaningful and respectable identity. He wants them to be like strong and courageous ‘Macduff’ who had been respectable and loyal to his country. It was Macduff in the Shakespearean play Macbeth who stood up against the ill-motives of evil minded ones in his country. He helps a righteous man to fight against the usurper. By this reference, the poet is asking all to work unitedly for regaining the lost identity. In one of the speeches, Garvey proclaims:

“It comes to the individual, the race, the nation, once in a life time to decide upon the course to be pursued as a career. The hour has now struck for the individual Negro as well as the entire race to decide the course that will be pursued in the interest of our own liberty. We who make up the Universal Negro Improvement Association have decided that we shall go forward, upward and onward toward the great goal of human liberty. We have determined among ourselves that all barriers placed in the way of our progress
must be removed, must be cleared away for we desire to see the light of a brighter day. The Negro is Ready The Universal Negro Improvement Association for five years has been proclaiming to the world the readiness of the Negro to carve out a pathway for himself in the course of life.”

(Garvey)

Afro-Americans at the start of the 1920s were struggling to overcome racial barriers. W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey were two influential Black political leaders of the 1920s. Du Bois and Garvey had a lot of influence over later generations and helped further the cause of racial equality. Marcus Garvey was a proponent of the Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism movements to which end he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association. It was the largest mass movement happened in America. For Garvey, it was no less than the will of God for Black people to be free to determine their own destiny. His organization took as its motto ‘One God! One Aim! One Destiny!’ Garvey believed Afro-Americans needed to improve themselves first, showing Whites in America that they deserved equal rights. He also believed that they must stand up and do something to break the racial consciousness of Americans. He often encouraged his people that only prayer is not going to improve their condition, not the policy of watchful waiting. He was of the opinion that they must strike out for themselves in the course of material achievement. One of his poems Go and Win is one fine example of such urges:

“Ye Negroes of the world, another day has come,
To test your worth of racial character;
Your lives and homes, you see, are threatened everywhere;
The time is now for you to do and then to dare.

Your youth must struggle with the facts as they are seen,
And blaze the trail for home and life redeemed:
Your hope, I claim, is in the courage of the time,
So go ye forth and win the battle that's sublime.”

(Garvey n. pag.)
Here Garvey urged everyone to do something constructive and productive for the sake of their betterment. Creating a unique identity or gaining their pride should be their sole goal they should fight for. He always said that the Negro needs a nation and country of his own where he can show his own ability and progress. For this reason, he always encouraged his people to unite together to achieve higher goal. In order to realize their dream, first of all they should follow a definite path to go forward. So he urged everyone to join his Association. In clarifying its objectives, he announced in one of his speeches:

“The work of the Universal Negro Improvement Association is clear and clean-out. It is that of inspiring an unfortunate race with pride in self and with the determination of going ahead in the creation of those ideals that will lift them to unprejudiced company of races and nations. There is no desire for hate or malice, but every wish to see all mankind linked into a common fraternity of progress and achievement that will wipe the odor of prejudice, and elevate the human race to the height of real godly love and satisfaction.”

(Garvey, 369)

The important thing he wanted to emphasize in these words is that his UNIA was working for the universal emancipation of his race and the redemption of a common country, Africa. He firmly believed that no Negro shall truly be respected until the people of race as a whole have emancipated themselves. He meant to tell that the Negro will have to build his own government, industry, art, science, literature and culture. Only then they will be able to be the wards of a superior race and civilization. He wanted all the members of his race to hold fast to the ideal of a dignified Negro race. He asked his lot to work together as one people for making of a nation of their own because they were as much capable as the Whites. To quote a few stanzas of one of his most celebrated poems Africa for the Africans:

“Say! Africa for the Africans,
Like America for the Americans:
This is the rallying cry for a nation,
Be it peace or revolution.
Blacks are men, no longer cringing fools;  
They demand a place, not like weak tools;  
But among the world of nations great  
They demand a free self-governing state.

Hurrah! Hurrah! Great Africa wakes;  
She is calling her sons, and none forsakes,  
But to colors of the nation runs,  
Even though assailed by enemy guns.

Cry it loud, and shout it long, hurrah!  
Time has changed, so hail! New Africa!  
We are now awakened, rights to see;  
We shall fight for dearest liberty.

…

Blackmen’s hands have joined now together,  
They will fight and brave all death’s weather,  
Motherland to save, and make her free,  
Spreading joy for all to live and see.

None shall turn us back, in freedom’s name,  
We go marching like to men of fame  
Who have given laws and codes to kings,  
Sending evil flying on crippled wings.”

(Marcus Garvey 2016)

Marcus Garvey’s plea had a message of liberty for Africans. His message highlighted the point that all men should be free to work for their own salvation. Since other nations were working to achieve their salvation, Africans should be allowed to do the same, and they should be given the freedom to create their own ‘self-governing state’. His appeal to the White world was to yield unto Africans a place where they would be able to develop their national freedom; that place being Africa that will be ‘new Africa’. He expressed the thought that no one had an exclusive right to rule others and that each nation should be
equal to the next. Garvey felt that no Blackman was good enough to govern Whites, and as a result, no White person good enough to govern Blacks. He espoused that the Blackman should have liberty from White oppression. The poet says that ‘We are now awakened; rights to see / We shall fight for dearest liberty.’ They have an absolute trust on them that nobody shall be able to do anything in the pursuit of their freedom. They will go on ‘marching’ further for the sake of realizing their goal. They have become conscious of their lowly status, so they will make their sincere attempt to reach to their destination; their destination had been a complete freedom from their centuries of bondage.

Thus, Garvey and the UNIA have expanded the cultural atmosphere of the Harlem Renaissance movement which produced a flowering of Afro-American literature, poetry, music and visual arts. Garvey and the UNIA have called for the Black Arts Movement. It produced the Black aesthetic which affirmed the humanity of African people and advance the race. Garvey spoke about the New Negro, and showed his pride for his race. At the time, Garvey also wrote a newspaper called the Negro World. This newspaper explained exploits of the heroes of his race. Garvey is regarded as the leader of the largest organized mass movement in Black history and the progenitor of the modern ‘Black Is Beautiful’ revival that reached its apogee in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. Hailed by his followers in the 1920s as a kind of political redeemer, Garvey has continued to fascinate writers, scholars and researchers of the Harlem Renaissance period.

The Harlem Renaissance united the sense of togetherness and the collective identity of the Blacks as the colored people in America. The Harlem Renaissance was in fact an intellectual and literary movement. Its poets and writers presented the notion of racial solidarity of the Blacks through their literature. As the American Dream had given rise to an image of the America, celebrating his liberation from the social, political, religious and economic burden from the European past, the Harlem Renaissance gave rise to an image of the New Negro. The American Adam was looked upon as an aggressive, radical, bold, dare-devil and ready to take upon any challenge of life. He was innocent too. He was not ashamed of his blackness but on the other hand he proudly upheld his racial
identity. There is a difference between the image of the African Adam and that of the Negro. Because the White European settlers in America were cut off from their European cultural and historical past. Their sense of belonging was also cut off as the land, geography seasons, climate etc. were new for them in America. In order to compensate the loss of history they turned to the Biblical myth.

Therefore, America became a paradise and they themselves became the American Adams who wanted to establish a perfect religious, social, political and economic system in the new world of America. However, the image of the American Adam was based on a Biblical myth, but the image of the New Negro was based upon the Black community’s real experience of life in racist America. The American Adam hated his European past because in Europe he was exploited, attacked and imprisoned in the name of religion and politics. He had no right to possess private property. But the New Negro wanted to revive the cultural past of his race. He was proud of his blackness and African roots or historical past and the Black way of life. Therefore, he wanted to preserve and perpetuate his Black cultural and racial identity, and the African tradition. The Harlem Renaissance inspired the highly talented Black writers who started expressing their racial and cultural identity through their literary creations. Several magazines such as Crisis by W.E.B. Du Bois, Opportunity by Alain Locke etc. provided a platform for Black intellectuals and artists. The Harlem Renaissance inspired some very great works of many literary figures such as Claude Mckay, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Anna Bontemps, Jean Toomer and many others.

Claude McKay was a famous poet during the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was a time when African-American writers and artists expressed themselves through their writing and art. For the first time in American history, African-American writers were very popular in America. Though born and raised in Jamaica, McKay eventually immigrated to the United States. While many of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance were born and raised in the U.S., McKay had a different perspective. His poems talk about America with a view that mixed love and hate, pain and pleasure. He was able to see America for all of its qualities, good and bad, because he had chosen America as his home. In addition to giving a voice to Black immigrants, McKay was one
of the first African-American poets of the Harlem Renaissance. As such, he influenced later poets, including Langston Hughes. He paved the way for Black poets to discuss the conditions and racism that they faced in their poems. Here are glimpses of two of Claude McKay's poems about being Black in America. Perhaps McKay's most famous poem is titled *America*. In some ways, it is a love sonnet to the country McKay had chosen as his own, though it also discusses the darker side of American society. The poet says:

“Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger’s tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate,
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet, as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time’s unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.”

(McKay 2016)

Twenty years before McKay wrote this poem, another famous Harlem Renaissance writer, W.E.B. Du Bois, wrote about the 'two-ness' of African-Americans: how they are caught between being Black and being American. This was a central issue in many Harlem Renaissance writings: how to reconcile being part of a country that celebrated freedom, while at the same time being restricted by society and unjust laws that took away the freedom of Blacks. McKay says, ‘Stealing my breath of life’ and ‘feeds me the bread of bitterness.’ The words stealing and bitterness gives the reader the feeling of disgust. But later he goes on to say ‘I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!’ showing that he sees this new life in America as a challenge.
McKay builds the idea of duality in his poem. He alternates between anger and frustration at the way America 'sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth' into his flesh and his love for the country, full of wonders and treasures. He says he feels 'not a shred/Of terror, malice,' but yet he describes America as a 'cultured hell' that 'feeds...bread of bitterness.' Yet, McKay also says he loves America, and he points out it gives him strength to stand against her. McKay's poem celebrates the two sides of the African-American experience. It juxtaposes hate and love, as well as pain and pleasure, and demonstrates what many Blacks were going through at that time.

The Philosophical meaning of this poem is about the Black struggle and how hard it is to be raised and growing up in America. It talks about standing up to the trends and how scary and life threatening it can be. The narrator also does not see hope in the future and wonders if there can actually be change in the future. He compares true freedom to treasures in the sand. This freedom the narrator is talking about is the freedom needed to pursue their actual dreams instead of living a closed in, segregated unfair life.

The place of Negro in the modern world was a great problem that obsessed McKay from his arrival in the United States until his death in 1948. For a while after World War I, he thought that in communism Negroes might find a great world brotherhood. In the twenties, he turned from international communism but not from the common Negro, with whom he always closely identified. Arthur D. Drayton has written about the poet’s early knowledge of his ancestors:

“He learned in childhood how a family of his ancestors, brought over in chains from Madagascar, had kept together by declaring a death strike on the auction block. Each would kill himself, they vowed solemnly, if they were sold to separate owners. With the blood of such rebels in his veins, and their memory to stir it, Claude McKay grew proud of his race and with no disposition to apologize for his color.”

(Drayton, 88)
Nowhere in his volumes of poetry is there any anger in his voice, although over and over again he is reprimanding those responsible for social injustices to his people. No doubt, McKay, waiting to relieve his feelings, must have sought for redeeming features in the dark picture. So that while gentle nature led him to pity his people’s suffering and to protest against this, his need for relief must have compelled him to celebrate their cheerfulness and other such qualities. That is to say, what emerges from his poetry is not only his keen sense of suffering and his people’s suffering, but also his deep knowledge of what sustains them and makes them interesting and vital human beings, their cheerfulness and good humor in spite of dispiriting conditions. He came to the conclusion that in Negro working people there existed a lot of creativity and joy in life which Europeans lost. In their folk culture lays strength enough for their salvation. McKay felt Negroes should not lose sight of their uniqueness and the value of their own creations while taking what was valuable from the larger European civilization. He laid much emphasis on the need for Negroes to develop a group spirit. McKay did have a lot of pride of race. The dedication of his first volume of poetry to his race is the proof of his consciousness of and love for his race. For this reason, he encourages his people not to give up in times to come in their adverse time. Here is the poem which brought McKay to the alert attention of the Negro world. The title of the poem *If We Must Die* is very suggestive. It was a desperate shout of defiance. The poet proclaims:

“If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!”

(McKay, 377)

This poem was penned in 1919 by Claude McKay. At the time it was published, serious race riots primarily involving White assaults on Black neighborhoods in a dozen American cities were occurring. McKay wrote this poem in response to these race riots that resulting in the deaths of numerous Black people. It was his desire for Black people simply not to accept these assaults and murders but to fight back against these efforts to annihilate them. The poem is an address to the Blacks of the United States. It was addressed to African-Americans who were undergoing a harsh life. The poem was a wakeup call for the Blacks to stand up and fight for their rights. The poet emphasizes, however, that the deaths of his people must be noble, ‘not like hogs / Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot.’ The poet believes that if his people die through ‘fighting back,’ then their blood will not have been ‘shed in vain.’ Instead, the evil ‘monsters’ who persecuted them will have to ‘honor us though dead.’ McKay through this poem announced that it was a fight against racism, discrimination and oppression, For them, it was vital to understand that, fighting back will give one an opportunity to win the war.

The speaker of the poem highlights that to die to fighting against racism and discrimination is to ‘die nobly.’ During that time, they didn’t have enough people willing to combat the ‘monsters’ who oppressed them. One of the fundamental reasons why they were currently struggling to win against racial oppression was envy within their ranks. McKay’s poem calls for solidarity and not division among Black people. The poet wanted them to recognize that they were facing a ‘common foe’: racists. They would not allow envy to cause them to lose sight of the common foe. While they were attempting to undermine one another, the common foe was gaining a larger advantage in the effort to destroy them. McKay was keenly aware of how a lack of commitment to solidarity weakened Black people in the fight against their oppressors. The racists were united in their mission to destroy Black people. For McKay, Blacks must match their solidarity. The solidarity is necessary to defeating the strong shackles of racism.
Although their conditions were not exactly like those they faced during slavery period, Black people still faced racism, racial prejudice, and discrimination during 1920s. McKay wanted his people to learn to stand united against their oppressors. He was of the opinion that once they begin to recognize that they should stop fighting one another and start fighting their oppressors, they would witness the authentic change they longed to see. Thus through this poem, McKay appeals to his people to resist with courage and determination those who would crush their identities. In one of the poems *The Shroud of Color* by Countee Cullen, a very important figure of Harlem Renaissance, expresses such kind of wishes:

“And somehow it was borne upon my brain
How being dark, and living through the pain
Of it, is courage more than angels have. I knew
What storms and tumults lashed the tree that grew
This body that I was, this cringing I
That feared to contemplate a changing sky,
This that I grovelled, whining, “Let me die,”
While others struggled in Life’s abattoir.
The cries of all dark people near or far
Were billowed over me, a mighty surge
Of suffering in which my puny grief must merge
And lose itself; I had no further claim to urge
For death; in shame I raised my dust-grimed head,
And though my lips moved not, God knew I said,
“Lord, not for what I saw in flesh or bone
Of fairer men; not raised on faith alone;
Lord, I will live persuaded by mine own.
I cannot play the recreant to these;
My spirit has come home, that sailed the doubtful seas.”

(Cullen n. pag.)
A long poem of 199-lines begins with a speaker in crisis. It is one of most interesting poems by Cullen because it is so typical of the poet’s racial attitude at that time. Weighed down with the burden of color, the protagonist of this dramatic monologue cries out his miseries. ‘Being dark,’ he ‘cannot bear’ to go on living, and very melodramatically throws himself, groaning, onto the Earth, asking God to let him die. God instead reveals a vast cosmic vision—a vision which enables him to understand his suffering as a source of strength, and to find solidarity in the suffering of his people. The burden of race is made all the more intolerable when he remembers the happiness that was once his as he bathed as a free man in the ‘sun-babbled stream of native of Africa’. In his despair, he wishes to die, there is no purpose in a Black struggling against such hopeless odds as modern living imposes upon him. But at the end the speaker makes up his mind to live the further life with all dignity and unique identity. He has realized that ultimately through struggling he and his people will regain their lost identity. The ultimate happiness is lying in facing the life optimistically and cheerfully keeping faith in one oneself.

Racial equality and racial pride had been one of the dominant concerns the writers of the Harlem Renaissance were writing about. Some of the most famous writers of the Harlem Renaissance include Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston and Melvin Tolson, James Weldon Johnson, Robert Hyden and many others. These writers reflected the idea of a transformation from the ‘Old Negro’ to the ‘New Negro’. The New Negro was proud and challenged racism and the stereotypes that existed through their intellect and their production of literature, art, music, etc. These writers shared the common goal of developing innovative ways and forms of artistic representation of the African-American experience. They explored and expressed the experiences of Black America and life in the urban North. They celebrated their creativity, their race, their culture, and their freedom to express themselves in a new way that epitomized their Black identities. At the same time, however, they did have a wide range of racially diverse concepts of blackness. And even though all of these writers were Black, the Harlem Renaissance did mean different things to each of them and they all had unique ways of expressing their own Black identity and personal experiences.
Melvin Tolson is one of the most influential poets of not only Renaissance period, but of literary history all together. His importance in regards to the advancement of Afro-American literature and the Afro-American community as a whole is second to none. Tolson always had his share of support from many of the most well known poets of his time. The publication of Tolson's first collection of poetry, *Rendezvous with America*, won first place in the American Negro Exposition National Poetry Contest in 1939. *Dark Symphony* is one of his widely acclaimed poems. It is appealing in many ways. It talks of the racial pride and the glorious past of Afro-Americans in America. The poem has been divided in six parts. The first part *Allegro Moderato* discusses how Black Crispus Attucks is their hero and role model for their freedom struggle. The poet begins the poem with the following lines:

“Black Crispus Attucks taught
Us how to die
Before white Patrick Henry’s bugle breath
Uttered the Vertical
Transmitting cry:
“Yea, give me liberty or give me death.”

Waifs of the auctions block,
Men black and strong
the juggernauts of despotism withstood,
Loin-girt with faith that worms
Equate the wrong
And dust is purged to create brotherhood.

No Banquo’s ghost can rise
Against us now,
Aver we hobnailed Man beneath the brute,
Squeezed down the thorns of greed
On Labor’s brow,
Garroted lands and carted off the loot.”
The first part of this long poem refers to the past of Afro-Americans when they started their movement for liberation. Attucks was the first martyr of the American Revolution to die in the Boston Massacre. Attucks was a Black man. The poet says Attucks is more important than Patrick Henry, a leading White patriot and a historical figure. The line ‘Yea, give me liberty or give me death’ expresses the valor and spirit of a Black man for the noble cause of freedom. In the further part, the poet also reminds one of the brutal times of slave auction. He states that the Black men started getting united right from the beginning when the slave trades were being held. As Black men stood at the auction block in the times of slavery, they created a brotherhood through tragedy. In the end, the Black man is stronger and less greedy than the White man. The historical aspect of this poem is most heavily seen in this part which shows one the middle passage and the auction of slaves and how it became a unifying experience for Africans going on into the brutal labor and hardship of slavery in part 3. In this part, the poet also says that the Whites wanted the Blacks to forget their brutal past as if it never happened. The poet says in this part:

“They tell us to forget
The Golgotha we tread…
We who are scourged with hate,
A price upon our head.
They who have shackled us
require of us a song,
They who have wasted us
Bid us condone the wrong.

They tell us to forget
Democracy is spurned.
They tell us to forget
The Bill of Rights is burned.
Three hundred years we slaved,
We slave and suffer yet:
Thought flesh and bone rebel,
They tell us to forget!

Oh, how can we forget
Our human rights denied?
Oh, how can we forget
Our manhood crucified?
When Justice is profaned
And plea with curse is met,
When Freedom’s gates are barred,
Oh, how can we forget?”

(Tolson, 138)

Tolson says that the Whites wanted Afro-Americans to forget their bitter past: their being shacked, their getting exploited, their being humiliated, and a lot more. But this part ends with one question: ‘How can we forget our human rights denied?’ It has been impossible for the Blacks to forget their suffering caused by their oppressors. The Blacks have fought for their freedom and dignified identities for centuries which were snatched away by the Whites. But at the turn of 20th centuries, due to the opportunities of education, the Blacks have become conscious of their lost identity. Additionally, the movement known as the Great Migration and New Negro Movement also influenced the Harlem Renaissance. During this time, thousands of Black Americans moved from the rural South to the industrial cities of the North. Harlem was one of the neighborhoods that developed as a result of the Great Migration and it quickly became the political and cultural center of Black America. New trends in American society also contributed to this cultural phenomenon. So the poet, being one of the spokesmen of his race, announced that he and his people are no longer going to bear this cruelty and inequality. The poet proclaimed in the third part of the same poem:

“The New Negro
Breaks the icons of his detractors,
Wipes out the conspiracy of silence,
Speaks to his America:
My history-moulding ancestors
Planted the first crops of wheat on these shores,
Built ships to conquer the seven seas,
Erected the Cotton Empire,
Flung railroads across a hemisphere,
Disemboweled the earth’s iron and coal,
Tunneled the mountains and bridged rivers,
Harvested the grain and hewed forests,
Sentineled the Thirteen Colonies,
Unfurled Old Glory at the North Pole,
Fought a hundred battles for the republic.”

(Tolson, 138)

The fourth part begins with the word ‘New Negro’. Here a New Negro is a self-conscious man who will fight for creating a just society where everyone is considered equal and will try his best to create his new dignity. The New Negro is someone who is admired and looked upon as equal if not greater than any other race of people. He goes on to describe the accomplishments of the Old Negro and the New Negro, which is a race to be appreciated and feared for its power. The poem leaves one with the New Negro and how he will shape the world in the future as much as any other race. The New Negro states the accomplishments of his ancestors and shares in the most important cultural activities of today. The tribute to brave ancestors who bravely fought for their freedom has also been given by Robert Hayden. One such poem is Fredrick Douglass in which Hayden takes a figure from Afro-American history as his subject. This poem praises the nineteenth century abolitionist but also presents a vision of a better future for Black Americans. Hayden says:

“When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful and terrible thing, needful to man as air,
usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,
when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole, reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians: this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world where none is lonely, none hunted, alien, this man, superb in love and logic, this man shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues’ rhetoric, not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone, but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.”

(Hayden 2016)

The above-mentioned poem is in fact a tribute to Frederick Douglass himself. The poet offers honor to Douglass, a former slave who suffered tremendously but still believed in a free and better world. He was an escaped slave, was involved in the Underground Railroad and became publisher of the famous abolitionist newspaper the North Star, in Rochester and in New York. He was in a real sense a hero and inspired many of his brethren that their dream for freedom is possible though great efforts. It is they who are supposed to make it happen. He believed that they must not sit and wait for someone else to free them from their chains.

Hayden does a great job at using several literary techniques to emphasize the work Douglass has done for civil rights and more importantly to talk about freedom in general. He uses several similes, ‘needful to man as air’, ‘usable as earth’. In addition Hayden uses lists and repetition for emphasis: ‘this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful and terrible thing’, ‘this man, this former slave, this Negro’. By doing this Hayden correlates Frederick Douglass, the man being referred to, and the concept of freedom and liberty and all that he has done for civil rights. That freedom is not ‘terrible’ but it is ‘beautiful’. Although the obstacles to receiving this freedom were hard, it was all worth it in the end because freedom is indeed beautiful. Hayden also uses a humble tone when describing
Douglass not as a man who will receive statues, and reverence for his work but will be remembered through the freedom of future of Black men and women.

The Harlem Renaissance period produced a host of writers who dominated all forms of literature craving for liberty along with dignified identity. James Weldon Johnson also wrestled with the question of racial identity. He also wrote volumes of poetry and a collection of sermons in free verse representing the Black life. He distinguished himself equally as a man of letters, a leader of NAACP and as a civil rights leader in the early decades of the twentieth century. A talented poet and novelist, Johnson is credited with bringing a new standard of artistry and realism to Black literature. He was also one of the leading figures in the creation and development of the Harlem Renaissance in early decades of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, as head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) during the 1920s, Johnson led determined civil rights campaigns in an effort to remove the legal, political, and social obstacles hindering Black achievement. He also continued to write poetry. Among other songs of spirituality, Johnson penned a lyric titled *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. It was later adopted by the NAACP as the *Negro National Anthem*. *Lift Every Voice and Sing* is one of the most cherished songs of the African American Civil Rights Movement. It was performed for the first time by 500 school children in the celebration of President Lincoln's Birthday on 12th February, 1900. It is in true sense a tribute to Black endurance, hope, and religious faith. To quote the first two stanzas:

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“Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us,
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun
Let us march on till victory is won.
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Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.”

(Johnson, 32)

This hymn has been called the Black National Anthem because it celebrates how far Blacks have come from their days in bondage, and recognizes they still have far to go in their journey toward freedom. The speaker of the poem says that the Blacks should all lift their voices and sing together like one big happy family in honor of liberty. The poet calls them to sing the songs of hope and faith. The second stanza talks about the very difficult history of African-Americans. The poet refers to the ‘stony’ road that African-Americans have walked and the ‘rod’ that was used to ‘chasten’ them. The stony road and the rod are both metaphors that suggest the violence and difficulty of the African-American experience. They say that Afro-Americans have come a long way, through a lot of hardship, and now they are standing at the brink of a new, more hopeful freedom. The Blacks in bondage longed for their freedom, that is certain, and to know their children gained it had to be a matter of satisfaction for them. This hymn celebrates that freedom, while acknowledging there were many others along the way who never enjoyed it. Thus, it speaks of all Afro-Americans who ever had a family member that was a slave. His hymn reads like poetry, and it captures in graphic terms how Blacks suffered when they were slaves. One another poem titled Sonnet by Johnson is full of spirit and enthusiasm that encourages each Afro-American to keep the spirit up to ensure the freedom. Here is the poem:
“My heart be brave, and do not falter so,
Nor utter more that deep, despairing wail.
Thy way is very dark and drear I know,
But do not let thy strength and courage fail;
For certain as the raven-winged night
Is followed by the bright and blushing morn,
Thy coming morrow will be clear and bright;
’Tis darkest when the night is furthest worn.
Look up, and out, beyond, surrounding clouds,
And do not in thine own gross darkness grope,
Rise up, and casting off thy hind’ring shrouds,
Cling thou to this, and ever inspiring hope:
Tho’ thick the battle and tho’ fierce the fight,
There is a power making for the right.”

(Johnson 2016)

Johnson, through this poem, motivates each and every Black to go ahead with full confidence in him in the pursuit of freedom. He cautions him that his is not easiest path to tread upon. It is full of obstacles; obstacles in the form of segregation, discrimination, inequality and injustice. But then even they are not supposed to give up their mission. Such urge is expressed in the line: ‘But do not let thy strength and courage fail’. If they pass through despair in their operation, then happiness will follow surely. The poet explains this in simple language. He says that darkness is always followed by brightness. If clouds in the form of suffering come in their way, then there would surely brightness followed by them. The poet proclaims that everyone must rise up from the bitterness they have lived with till now and aim for complete freedom. They must not get shackled mentally. They should hold fast to the ideal of dignified Negro race. They should love their race, respect and adore their mothers. They must feel proud as their fathers were in the past. The poem is a clarion call to all Black people to fight for the dignified identity courageously. They may face some challenges in their mission but keeping faith in oneself will definitely help them to carry out a mammoth task. Similar kind of poem *Mother to Son* by Langston Hughes also expresses the same idea. Here a mother advises
her son to be strong in the pursuit of his goal. She instructs him not to go back down the stairs even if he thinks climbing is hard. He should try not to fall because his mother is still going, still climbing, and her life ‘ain’t been no crystal stair.’ The mother tells her son:

“Well, son, I’ll tell you:
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.
It’s had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I’ve been a-climbin’ on,
And reachin’ landin’s,
And turnin’ corners,
And sometimes goin’ in the dark
Where there ain’t been no light.
So boy, don’t you turn back.
Don’t you set down on the steps
’Cause you finds it’s kinder hard.
Don’t you fall now—
For I’se still goin’, honey,
I’se still climbin’,
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.”

(Hughes, 186)

In the above-mentioned poem, a Black mother asks her son to be conscious of the problems, difficulties and challenges that lie ahead. She convinces him that life is not an easy affair and an easily accessible carpet-walk on the floor. Here a mother advises her son that he will face many adversities in life, and yet he must overcome them and keep going. The mother compares the journey through life to ascending a staircase. She says
that for her life has not been a staircase made of crystal. Rather it has been quite rough with nails and pieces of wood, with full of obstacles boards torn up and places where the carpet was missing. However, she has kept climbing, through landings, corners and darkness in spite of such discomforts. She then asks the boy to walk in her footsteps and keep moving forward without turning back or giving up because he finds the journey arduous. She wants him to take inspiration from the fact that she is still going steady despite life’s hardships. During the slavery time, the Black slaves passed through many hardships, then even they never gave up their self-respect and fought bravely. After getting freedom, now it is the duty of a new generation to fight for equality and justice and carry on their freedom fight.

Such was the freedom spirit of Afro-American writers during the Harlem Renaissance period. The Harlem Renaissance shaped the poetic sensitivity of Hughes and all other creative artists. It occupies significant place in his poetic consciousness. It serves as a background to it. In other words, it can be said in the case of Hughes that Harlem becomes an actor or character in his writings. His poems convey his message to the Black community that it should struggle to rise above the life of subservience and self-hatred and raise to the higher level so as to attain universal freedom and dignity for the entire mankind. Hughes was truly a poet of the Black masses who wrote poetry out of his people’s need for self-respect, identity and self-assertion. The Harlem Renaissance increased community visibility in him. So he aimed at greater acceptance of the rights of African-Americans, who were still treated as second class citizens by the dominant white, upper class, male population of the United States. Hughes was not as aggressive as other exponents of this movement, and wanted greater integration of the African-American community into the mainstream of the American population.

*Let America Be America Again* is a poem in which he speaks on behalf of not just African-Americans, but all other minority communities in America. America is a land of immigrants, and Hughes is very aware of that. He knows that the ‘pioneers’ (the term he used to denote the early settlers of the United States) all came from various locations across the world, predominantly from Britain to get away from tyrannical regimes. Hughes also knows that America was formed when the Declaration of Independence was
adopted by the Continental Congress on 4th of July, 1776. This document asserted that the thirteen American colonies were, from that day, to be considered thirteen newly independent, sovereign states and it would no longer be a part of the British Empire. Thus, the Declaration of Independence promised autonomy in administrative matters, individual freedom, democracy, and equal opportunity. This is what Hughes believes was the American Dream. However, that dream is no longer valid, and the home that the immigrants had sought to build is not an easy task. Skepticism runs another course in the poem as well, with not just the death of the Dream, but with non-believers like Hughes who never believed that America would offer them democracy or equality at all. Hughes takes up a number of abstract concepts in the poem, and one of them is ‘Liberty’. He says that Liberty has lost all its original meaning, and has come to signify a ‘false patriotic wreath’. Loss of values is something that concerns Hughes greatly. This loss of values is exactly what allows the rich White man to exploit all other sections of society, driving out the American Indians from the lands that they rightfully owned, practicing slavery, and generally profiting from labor that is not his own. The poem touches various issues and events that were prominent at the time. It reaches out to various sectors in the American society, and talks about their condition in their circumstances. Hughes, through this poem, yearns for the America it once was. It also delves into issues of equality and freedom. A few lines of this long poem mentioned below will explain this:

“Let America be America again
Let it be the dream it used to be
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free

(America never was America to me)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed--
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above
O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath
But opportunity is real, and life is free
Equality is in the air we breathe
…
I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars
I am the red man driven from the land
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek--
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak
…
O, let America be America again--
The land that never has been yet--
And yet must be--the land where every man is free
The land that's mine--the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME--
Who made America
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain
Must bring back our mighty dream again.”

(Hughes, 193)

Hughes in this poem declares that America should be America again; it should be the dream it once was for the pioneer on the plain who sought a home where everyone could be free. The poet says ‘America was never America to me.’ He says America should go back to being the dream that the dreamers had, and be a ‘great strong land of love.’ There should not be kings or tyrants or people being crushed by someone above them. The speaker repeats, ‘It never was America to me.’ America has been a place of slavery, poverty, oppression, and lies. Hughes wants his land to embody liberty - not just by wearing a false patriotic wreath on its head, but through pervasive opportunity and equality. He claims that he has never experienced freedom or equality in America. In the further part of the poem, he claims that he is the one who dreamt of a free land while
living under the oppression of a king in the ‘Old World.’ This dream was so strong that it
drove him and his people to build America brick by brick. These dreamers who built
America fled persecution in Ireland, Poland, and England; they were torn from their
homes in Africa, and they built the ‘homeland of the free’ with their hands. This poem
not only focuses on African-Americans and their struggles, but also the economically
disadvantaged and immigrants who suffer from social bias and unfair treatment. It talks
of freedom and equality of Afro-Americans. Throughout the poem, Hughes contrasts his
hopes for America with the reality of life for those outside of the socially and
economically dominant racial, religious, and social groups. He evokes the fervent dreams
of those who came to the United States because they saw it as a haven where they could
be safe from the persecution they endured in their homelands - but those dreams of
America have never come true.

Coming to the periods 1960s and 70s, one may find a host of movements taking place in
the Afro-American social, political and literary history. The Black Arts Movement was
the name given to a group of politically motivated Afro-American poets, artists,
dramatists, musicians, and writers who emerged in the wake of the Black Power
Movement. The poet Amiri Baraka is widely considered to be the father of the Black Arts
Movement. With roots in the civil rights movement, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam,
and the Black Power movement, the Black Arts movement is usually dated from
approximately 1960 to 1970. Both the Black Power and Black Arts movements were
responses to the turbulent socio-political landscape of the time. As racial inequality
prevailed and Afro-American leaders such as Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin
Luther King Jr. were assassinated, organizations like the Congress of Racial Equality, the
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the Black Panther Party for Self-
Defense worked to protect the rights of African Americans. While the Black Arts
movement certainly wasn’t limited to poetry, poetry was the most dominating form of
literature produced by Black artists. This major emphasis of Black authors was to create
Black poetry for Black people as a means to awaken Black consciousness and achieve
liberation. The exponents of the Black Panthers and the Black Power movement
attempted to give an identity to Black people. Through using the slogan ‘black is
beautiful’ the BPP highlighted the fact that being Black is nothing to be ashamed of, it is something Black people should embrace.

The Black Panther Party, led by Huey Newton and Bob Seale, was influenced by Malcolm X’s aim to create Black Nationalism. X wanted Black people to have their own communities that are run and governed by Black people themselves. They had very extreme views to accomplish their aim. They felt that it was important for Black people to forge a new independent identity. Stokely Carmichael and Huey P. Newton felt it was important that young Black kids were taught about their African heritage and learn about powerful Black figures. They stressed this because African history was full of examples on Black radicals overthrowing oppression to gain independence. They also thought that teaching young Black people this was important for the self-esteem, self-respect, independence and pride to themselves.

New identities were also formed. Malcolm X adopted the surname X to recognize that his African surname was lost. The Afro hairstyle was also a popular symbol of Black identity. The change in identity had also altered words in the American vocabulary. The words like ‘Negros’ and ‘colored’ had negative connotations attached with and were associated with slavery and segregation. Activists rejected this and adopted the word ‘Black’ to refer them to. The word ‘Black’ had positive connotations, freedom and pride, which was another reason why it was adopted.

One of the most important figures of this Black Power Movement is Amiri Baraka. He has changed his name as an outward symbol of separate identity. Baraka has written several poems encouraging the formation of a new identity. He says that the Blacks should not blindly imitate the White cultural practices and internalize them as their own but must explore their own souls for his authentic Black identity or a genuine self. The central idea of his poem titled Kaba is emancipation and liberation of the Blacks. The earlier feelings of self-hatred give way to a sense of pride and self-respect. To quote the whole poem:

"A closed window looks down
on a dirty courtyard, and Black people
call across or scream across or walk across
defying physics in the stream of their will.

Our world is full of sound
Our world is more lovely than anyone's
tho we suffer, and kill each other
and sometimes fail to walk the air.

We are beautiful people
With African imaginations
full of masks and dances and swelling chants
with African eyes, and noses, and arms
tho we sprawl in gray chains in a place
full of winters, when what we want is sun.

We have been captured,
and we labor to make our getaway, into
the ancient image; into a new

Correspondence with ourselves
and our Black family. We need magic
now we need the spells, to raise up
return, destroy, and create. What will be
the sacred word?”

(Baraka, 117)

In the very first stanza the poet talks about how Black people are often forced to do things against their will, taken advantage of, and live in poverty. The phrases ‘closed window’ and ‘dirty courtyard’ imply that sense of imprisonment, like there is no way of getting out. The poet says that his brethren must break free from bondage, poverty, and sadness and live their lives in happiness. In the second stanza, the poet says that their lives are full of music, joy, love and happiness yet, they still suffer from all the pain and hardships they endured. ‘Our world’ meaning Africa is one of the most beautiful places
on earth, yet they hate themselves resulting in destruction. In the third stanza the poet is saying that Black people as a whole are beautiful, but they fail to realize that. They come from a beautiful African culture that involves music, costumes, masks, and dancing. They were captured like animals and taken to a cold winter place, but they really wanted to be home in the warm sunny land of Africa. They worked and did hard labor to escape, but that image of home never became reality. The poet goes on to say that they need to come together, they need God, they need miracles, to rise up for permanent freedom.

A close study of Baraka’s poems shows a gradual shift of focus from his pre-occupation with the theme of racism to the theme of Black awakening. There is a sense of urgency in it. He wants the Black awakening to happen at the earliest. He provides his logic behind this kind of urgency. He wants to destroy the existing order and create new one. Baraka’s poems have a cosmic dimension and a futuristic vision. They defy European consciousness and formulate a new consciousness about race. He has explained this in his essay Raise, Rage, Rays and Raze. The title has four verbs that comment on his strategy and his subversive agenda to raise consciousness of people in general against the racial discrimination, to protest against the White normative standards of cultural creations. He wants his race to become cosmic in approach like the rays of the sun and then raze or demolish the discriminatory exploitative racial social structure for the germination of a new one. Baraka wants to dedicate himself to the cause of new Black Nationalism as he regards the Blacks as the prophets of the earth. He wants to unite them for sublime purpose of a Black nationhood. Like Walt Whitman, Baraka thinks that art should provide role model. Therefore, he attempts to kindle a fiery spirit in the souls of the Blacks. He intends to inculcate in them a killer instinct. This has great influence on the Black folk. He replaces the stereotypical image of submissive, docile Negroes with those of the heroic Blacks as depicted by Malcolm X. such aggressive, subversive and offensive images have an inspiring impact on the common Blacks. The poem in his collection Black Magic substantiates his theory of Black Nationalism. In fact, Baraka wants to reconstitute the socio-cultural and political structure. He believes that conventional methods have failed to produce desired results as they have not brought any qualitative change in the basic structure of established society. Therefore, he wants Black men to start a revolutionary war against all odds in their way and crush the cruel White
Americans. Baraka tries to offer theoretical framework to his poems as well as to the whole generation of Black writers. William Harris comments in this reference:

“Baraka has not only helped rejuvenate political art in America but has also helped expand the post-war idea of the poem. As it was in the thirties, in the hands of Baraka and his heirs. The poem is weapon again, a much more sophisticated weapon because Baraka brings to his Black political art. The advanced techniques of the modernists and the post modernist making his an American Berchat or Godard.”

(Harris, 126)

Amiri Baraka wants to convey that a poem should be able to deliver a valuable spirit. The valuable spirit here means that the words in the poem should awaken the readers’ soul or they should give stimuli for the readers to give reaction over it. The further meaning of valuable spirit can be grabbed by reading Baraka’s Black Art:

“We want, poems that kill.
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead …”

(Baraka n. pag.)

Amiri Baraka wants to stress that he produced poems that could be a weapon. The weapon means that a poem can be a means of developing the African-Americans’ spirit to battle the Whites’ oppression. With the spirit, they can fight against the Whites to gain their freedom. Therefore, Baraka chooses to make poems that can open his people that they also have power when the unity is created among them. He awakened his Afro-American brothers to be more conscious to announce that they were Black proudly:

“We are finding out what we are when we rule ourselves
how we sound when we teach ourselves
how we look when we judge our selves
we are finding out, need to
need to
Look Inside, Somebody”s There
the deep picture fronts a sun, rising, new day
to day
to find out how we need to do.”

(Baraka, 32)

In the poem above, Baraka encourages the Black people to know their own identity. To gain the identity, they had to know about themselves first. They had to know what fitted their life. Rules, for example, were things that they should understand. They should live with their own rules, not the rules made by the Whites to control them in living their lives. Therefore, they should see themselves first, more importantly their wishes that were internalized in their heart. They had to find out the basic desires they wanted to achieve, such as being free as human beings in doing their rights. To be able to look inside them, the Afro-American people had to force themselves to break the chain in form of the Whites’ oppression that tied them over hundred years. Baraka mentions the sun to symbolize the new days they could have when they could conquer themselves to be free from the shadow of the Whites’ oppression. New days always bring new hopes. Therefore, Baraka emphasized that the Afro-Americans had first to find out who they really were until they completely gained in their mind the consciousness as the African descents. After they understood who they really were, they could determine the steps they needed to do.

Maya Angelou’s poems are powerfully encouraging. They are community-oriented and have succeeded in creating a sense of urgency in the readers. Her poems do not lament over the appalling predicaments of the Blacks but celebrate their experiences. In the poems like *Still I Rise* and *Million March Man Poem* she not only rises out of the predicament of gender and race, but gives clarion call to fellow sufferer. These poems are revolutionary and dedicated to the mission of overcoming racial prejudice and claiming a dignified identity. They are not just a feeble attempt of a shackled female’s helpless cry against personal struggle but the clarion call of a brave woman to her brethren. Through these poems, she asserts herself, echoes her past, traces her root, cries over her
predicament of her race, educates her community and gives a clarion call to the Blacks to venture into the creation of a heaven out of the existing hell. She asks her lot be spirited and courageous to carry out the mission of eradicating racial and gender discrimination. In *Still I Rise*, a merge of bold proclamations and that of unanswerable questions addressing the Whites can be observed. Throughout the poem one is able to bear the haughty tone of the poet declaring indirectly how beautiful Blacks are. At the same time one can find her threatening the Whites that no efforts of theirs will be able to crush her spirit as they have done to her ancestors. In the following lines of this poem, she articulates the plight of the Blacks and indulges in self analysis employing rhetorical questions:

“Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own back yard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

…

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise.”

(Angelou n. pag.)

The poem is only addressed to the White oppressors. The poem expresses that a Black woman is willing to speak up for herself, and for her race, and even for her Black ancestors. The poem is both highly political and highly personal. The speaker is responding to decades and even centuries of oppression and mistreatment. Then even her tone never sounds arrogant or overconfident. Instead, most readers are likely to feel immense sympathy with her spirited rejection of further oppression. Through this poem, Angelou expresses her faith in the notion that the Blacks will be able to put off the weight of segregation from her shoulders, and stand tall and proud. The word ‘still’ already emphasizes the Black people’s ability to stand up for their rights again and again, as and when required. Through the word ‘black ocean’, she points out that her Black race is spread far and wide like the ocean except with uniqueness that the ocean is Black, a pointer of the colored people. The picture of the black ocean that one gets is that of an ocean that is ‘leaping, welling and swelling’ warning the Whites of its disparaging nature once it crosses its limits.

Maya Angelou is one of the first African American women who publicly discussed her personal life, and remained a spokesperson for Black people and women all her life. Angelou's work centered on identity, family, and racism. She was of the opinion that the human race is 'whole’ with characteristics of kindness and compassion for others. For her, humanity hurts because of all shades of slavery, beginning with the Bible, thousands of years ago. It all hurts but in her poem Still I Rise she reassures all the enslaved that one can gain freedom if hope is alive. The theme of this poem is self respect and confidence. In the poem, she reveals how she will overcome anything with her self-esteem. She shows how nothing can get her down. She will rise to any occasion and nothing, not even her skin color will hold her back. Essentially the poem is about triumph over adversity. It is about strength and courage, and fortitude. It is about not accepting one's vulnerability in the face of domination. And basically it is about joining together with one voice and saying, they will overcome.
In *Still I Rise*, if Angelou talks of her private and unique experiences of her struggle and how she overcomes all that, in *Million Man March Poem*, she talks of her community and of the alarming plight of many a Black woman in the past and in the present. If fact, she identifies her personal struggle with the struggle of her race since ages. Thereby, she becomes conscious of itself in history. It is in this poem that Angelou shares the horrific experiences of her race they had in the past and exhorts her community to nurture and preserve the communal bond. She also urges them to come together as has been vowed during the Million Man March to claim for freedom and independent identity. Besides that she makes her people comprehend the significance of their history in the lines that follow:

“But today, voices of old spirit sound
Speak to us in words profound,
Across the years, across the centuries,
Across the oceans, and across the seas.
They say, draw near to one another,
Save your race.
You have been paid for in a distant place,
The old ones remind us that slavery's chains
Have paid for our freedom again and again.”

(Angelou n. pag.)

These lines bring to the leaders of Black race the idea that it is the responsibility of each and every member of race to combat against slavery and to move forward towards freedom because countless ancestors of theirs have sacrificed their lives for the sake of their emancipation. She also asks them to take note of the sadistic pleasure the whites were enjoying by imposing pain to them. She also emphasizes them that they must resist society’s efforts to limit their aspirations. In this poem she therefore reasons out to her people and makes them understand the pains they have put up with so far. She says:

“The hells we have lived through and live through still,
Have sharpened our senses and toughened our will.
The night has been long.
This morning I look through your anguish
Right down to your soul.”

(Angelou n. pag.)

Angelou instills courage into all the Blacks by making them recall those moments when they have wrestled against various unforeseen hardships in life. She does not cease from sensitizing them but in this poem she proceeds to entreat all the Blacks ‘to come together’. In the further part of the poem, she rouses their spirits commanding:

“I say, clap hands and let's come together in this meeting ground,
I say, clap hands and let's deal with each other with love,
I say, clap hands and let us get from the low road of indifference,
Clap hands, let us come together and reveal our hearts,
Let us come together and revise our spirits,
Let us come together and cleanse our souls,
Clap hands, let's leave the preening
And stop impostering our own history.”

(Angelou n. pag.)

Her call becomes more authentic when she draws inspiration from her roots in the same poem. It is indeed her clarion call to the Blacks to ‘draw near to one another’ and to overcome all barriers destroying the roads of indifference. Despite frustrations and tragedies in the lives of the Blacks, they remain unscathed and happy. Tones of happiness can be heard in this poem. It can be said that it is the song of jubilations. She tells her people in the ending part of this poem:

“Clap hands, call the spirits back from the ledge,
Clap hands, let us invite joy into our conversation,
Courtesy into our bedrooms,
Gentleness into our kitchen,
Care into our nursery.
The ancestors remind us, despite the history of pain
We are a going-on people who will rise again.”

(Angelou n. pag.)

From the lines mentioned above, it is quite apparent that Angelou wants her people to change at all levels and raise above all their impediments. It is to be noted at this point that Angelou has encountered tremendous hardships all through her life. She was a sexual object not only to the White man but the man of her race. Irrespective all these she had to be strong in order to survive. Her poems are quest for freedom and equality and move from subjugation to self-expression, from suppression to assertion, from darkness to light. *Equality* is one of Angelou’s later poems and was published in the volume *I Shall Not Be Moved* in 1990. As the title already implies it deals with equality, racial equality as well as gender equality. The poet says:

“We have lived a painful history,
we know the shameful past,
but I keep on marching forward,
and you keep on coming last.

Equality, and I will be free.
Equality, and I will be free.

Take the blinders from your vision,
take the padding from your ears,
and confess you've heard me crying,
and admit you've seen my tears.

Hear the tempo so compelling,
hear the blood throb in my veins.
Yes, my drums are beating nightly,
and the rhythms never change.

Equality, and I will be free.
Equality, and I will be free.”
The title of the poem gives the message of equality, maybe not just equality to Afro-Americans but also to all kinds of equality, such as gender, race, height, weight and age. Equality is also shown with the use of repetition of the line ‘equality and I will be free’. The word ‘I/we’ represents African Americans and ‘You’ is believed to be White authority. This line means that once she or African Americans become equal to the rest of the White people, they will finally be free of judgment and discrimination. This poem is directly correlated to race, the history of race and racism in America. Maya is protesting oppression in this poem. Angelou talks about her people’s situational suffering and how she yearns them to be free. Freedom can only be achieved if she is free of pain and distress. This is what shows that it has direct ties to the history of race, such as a slave wanting to be treated equally, and not given freedom by the slave owner.

In this way, the researcher has examined the impact of racial discrimination and the trauma caused by assassination, displacement, partition and other forms of assault on the Afro-Americans and the construction of new identities among them while struggling for the freedom and equality in the face of exploitation, dehumanization and degradation by colonial power. The main focus was to study the quest of identity and identity formation in the selected Afro-American poetry of all periods: pre-slavery era, post-slavery era, Reconstruction Period, Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Movement, Black Arts Movement and the poetry of recent times. Identity crisis has been a concern for African-Americans writers, in almost all the literary genres in the long sweep of African American history. Their poetry brings one close to conditions of physical and mental bondage and despair associated with their political, social, and economic surrounding. It has also focused on how such environment hinders the attainment of their spiritual as well as physical freedom. The selection of the above texts has been grounded in the fact that they reflect the cultural relevance of the historical, social, economic, and political dimensions of African-American identity crisis. The poems selected in this chapter do not cover the entire historical periods; instead they are representative of different times.
During slavery period, slaves were defined as private commodities and their definition by race left them in the process of alienation and commoditization. It was also observed that laws and customs confined the status and identity of the African American to a chattel, one in bondage for life, the irrational being, a thing and not a person. Since Blacks were inferior, they could never intermingle with Whites on basis of civil, political, or social equality. Thus, skin color determined the individual’s identity, social value, political and economic options. Deprived of access to literacy, the tools of citizenship, denied the rights of selfhood by law, philosophy, Black Americans published individual histories in the form of literature. They attempted to narrate the collective history of their race and their quest of identity. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife- the longing to attain self-conscious identity. Even though slavery drove to the misery, the Afro-American still had a hope to be free from the sufferings one day. The literary figures of that period made their sincere efforts for regaining their consciousness and selfhood through the medium of literature. Poetry was a dominant form they have used for this purpose.

Having suffered from long time, some activists and other political figures of different movement like Harlem Renaissance during 1920s, Civil rights Movement in 1950s, Black Power Movement, Black Arts Movement in 60s and 70s came to a decision to fight back the racial consciousness in which they were treated by Whites. Many of these activists were prominent literary figures themselves. They began to propose their own consciousness. They declared that all of the thing they had done should be related to ‘Black Consciousness’, a consciousness that Afro-American should be based on. They had to have their own identity as Black people. They believed that political and ideological lines could be swept away with effective organization and the development of proper Black consciousness to reveal a solid core of racial interests that connected all African Americans. Thus, these activists announced new race consciousness that placed Black identity as the soul of a new militancy. This means that the African Americans had to have their own identity, and to express this identity, it was necessary to use militant tactics. They tried to encourage those people to move forward for their own existence in all aspects of life.
Works Cited


