

***The American in Algiers (1797) as an
Abolitionist Poem: the Appropriation of
White Slavery in Algiers as an Appeal
against Black Slavery in the United
States.***

**By Bouteldja Riche and Mouloud SIBER
Mouloud MAMMERI University of Tizi-Ouzou**

Abstract

*This paper has studied the issue that *The American in Algiers (1797)* is an abolitionist poem. As the poem is anonymously published by an American writer, it is read from a new historicist and cultural materialist perspective. Therefore, it is considered in the light of other American writings, literary or not, that were produced in the 1790s and dealt with the captives of Algiers crisis or slavery in the United States along with the Constitution of the United States and the Declaration of Independence. The point is that the poem appropriates the crisis of the so-called captivity and enslavement of American citizens in Algiers to appeal against black slavery in the United States. This is achieved through drawing analogies between the political and religious factors behind the slavery practice both in Algiers and the United States as well as revealing the inhumanity of the practice. Doing so allows the poet raise abolitionist concern on the part of the Americans, who are outraged by the enslavement*

of their citizens in Algiers but carry on exploiting black slaves in their own soil.

Keywords: *American captives in Algiers, black slavery, political and religious factors, inhumanity, abolition.*

Abbreviation: within the framework of this paper, **AA** is used to refer to the poem *The American in Algiers* (1797).

Introduction

Black slavery has early been a controversial issue in American culture. Though the majority of voices were for slavery rather than against it, some early American writers were foregrounding the idea that black slavery was at odd with the founding principles of the American nation. When the Americans were coping with their own citizens being enslaved in North Africa in the end of the eighteenth century, there was a rush after deploring their states through captivity narratives, poems, plays and non-fiction writings. Among these works, one poem is particularly interesting as it draws an analogy between black slavery in the United States with white slavery in Algiers. The anonymous poem *The American in Algiers, or the Patriot of Seventy Six in Captivity* (1797) is a very important contribution not only to the bulk of literature that was being poured into American culture about white slavery in North Africa but also about black slavery in the United States.

The little critical attention the poem has received has made some reference to its interest in the issue of slavery. Philip Gould observes that while the poem “called for relief of American

citizens who were enslaved in North Africa” it also highlighted “this same problem in the United States” with the enslavement of Africans by white planters (Gould, 2003: 95). Philip Gould does not, however, say anything about the abolitionist objective of the poem. Yet the writer divides the poem into two cantos. The first aligns with the popular culture about the evils of North African captivity so that the second would bring the American audience to a universalist and humanist perception of slavery. In this perspective, Paul Baepler (1999) emphasizes the significance of the North African captivity narratives to the emergence of the issue of slavery in America as they lead to the emergence of both pro-slavery and anti-slavery voices. The abolitionists recognized in the inhumane treatment of the white slaves of Africa the prominent argument against the ills of domestic slavery while the white proponents of black slavery saw in it the right argument for the inhumanity of the blacks as they originate from Africa. What Baepler does not say is that there was a collection of writings that were written not by captives but by their fellow citizens in the States, and these were not only concerned with the issue of captivity but also with issues related to domestic slavery. Not many scholars have though underlined the appropriation of white slavery in Algiers as an appeal against black slavery in the United States in these writings. James Micah Guster (2005) is a pioneering figure in underlining this idea in his historical introduction to the poem. As a matter of fact, though he does not provide a theoretically foregrounded analysis of the poem to explore this idea, it is important not to ignore acknowledgment of his idea as a starting point for this article.

Issue and Working Hypothesis

This article suggests a new historicist and cultural materialist reading of the anonymous poem *The American in Algiers* (1797) so as to underpin the appropriation of the evils of the enslavement of American citizens in North Africa as an appeal against the enslavement of the Africans in the United States. The idea is that the writer of the poem uses an element of the mainstream culture, namely the captivity genre, so as to initiate a discourse against the institutionalization of slavery in the United States. Therefore, the poem is at once conforming to the mainstream writings about white and/ or Christian slavery in North Africa, most importantly Algiers, and fleshing out a kind of counter discourse against black slavery in the States. On the one hand, it engages a kind of discursive practice with other writings of the period such as the narratives of captivity in North Africa, diplomatic correspondence and other writings about the suffering of Americans in North Africa. On the other hand, the poem is in dialogue with documents like the Constitution of the United States and the Declaration of Independence, which say least about the rights of the blacks, who are excluded from their emancipation project, and other writings which tend to glorify these fundamental texts despite their internal inconsistencies.

The poem, it should be said, is divided into two cantos: the first gives voice to an American captive in Algiers; the second is narrated by an African slave in the States. Both narrators speak out their sufferings under the shackles of slavery in Algiers and the United States, respectively. The aim behind this structural division is two-sided. First, the writer aspires to make the cause of the blacks known to the American reader through the lenses of

the sufferings of their own compatriots in Algiers. In this way, he (or she) draws an analogy between black slavery in the United States with white slavery in Algiers so as to raise a kind of abolitionist consciousness in the United States against the former since the Americans were outraged with the latter. The analogy drawn is directed towards three main points: the political and religious roots of slavery and the inhumane process through which the free men and women become slaves.

In terms of theoretical framework, this paper addresses the poem from a **new historicist** and **cultural materialist** perspective. The poem will be read in the light of the historical and cultural period in which it was published, i. e. the 1790s, when black slavery in the United States and white slavery in North Africa were prevailing so as to reveal its discursive relation with the historiography behind white and black slavery as well as the texts that were written on this historiography. As the poem is anonymous, the study of the appropriation of white slavery in North Africa as an appeal against black slavery in America is achieved through reading the poem in relation not only to the history of the issue of slavery but also the kind of literary and non-literary writings that were produced in the period. New historicism is used so as to show that the poem conforms to and is woven with the mainstream culture about white slavery in North Africa, and its cultural materialist aspect is related to the writer's commitment to the cause of the blacks, using one of the most important issues of the period. Indeed, though cultural materialism is the British equivalent for the American new historicism, one important element of difference is that the former gives importance to liberal and humanitarian **commitment** (Barry, 1995: 183) while the latter is less

concerned with such commitment, being more interested in questions of state power and its workings (Ibid. 179). Nevertheless, the two involve the reading of literary texts in the light of history as well as non-literary texts as these are woven textually within the literary texts. The document in the light of which the literary text is read becomes its “co-text”, and both of them are “expressions of the same historical moment” (Ibid. 173). According to Hans Bertens, the “new historicists see literature as actively involved in the making of history through its participation in discursive practices” (2001: 179). It is important to say that the new historicist reading of a literary text shows the ways it contributes to the making of history through reproducing the dominant discourse and at times criticising it. However, according to Bertens

while cultural materialist analyses of literary texts bring to light how these texts are (inevitably conservative) instruments of a dominant socio-cultural order, they also demonstrate how the apparent coherence of that order is threatened from the inside, by inner contradictions and by tensions that it seeks to hide. (Ibid. 186)

It means that the cultural materialist reading of the poem would show the way the poet reveals the inconsistencies and contradictions endemic to the American people and their rulers who are outraged by the enslavement of their fellow citizens in North Africa while they perpetuate slavery in their own republic.

Discussion

During the two decades that followed independence and as a result of the emergence of the North African captivity crisis on the American scene, the word *slavery* kept resonating tacitly in the American culture. Yet it was more popularly spread to the enslavement of the Americans in Algiers than the black slavery in the United States. For example, General David Humphreys and others celebrated the ideal of freedom so rooted in the American nation and made every man and woman happy to be American and free and denounced the so-called slave regimes that were prevailing in North Africa. Humphreys and others did not say anything about the blacks, who were being enslaved by these happy Americans, as if their enslavement participated in the perpetuation of this happiness, which was one of the founding principles of the nation. As a matter of fact, the poet in *The American in Algiers* tries to bring the evils of black slavery to the American scene through drawing a parallel with the enslavement of American citizens in Algiers. Canto One of the poem shows the extent to which the enslavement of the Americans in Algiers is evil so as to bring the issue of black slavery in the United States to the conscience of the slave holding Americans. Therefore, the poet juxtaposes the enslavement of the Americans in Algiers with that of the blacks in the States, which is the subject matter of Canto Two. In this way, the writer's abolitionist message would easily be received through making the American readers identify themselves with the sufferings of their fellow citizens in Algiers. Micah Guster observes that this juxtaposition aims at highlighting "the hypocrisy of Americans, who were outraged by the enslavement

of their fellow citizens in Algeria [...] while they continued to accept slavery at home” (2005: 243).

Canto One of the poem involves a kind of dialogue with the problem of the slaves in Algiers and the writings that were produced to depict its evils. It conforms to the mainstream culture that depicted the inhumanity of the enslavement of Americans in Algiers. However, the poem has a second dimension, that of showing the hypocrisy of the American slave holders who are outraged by the suffering of their citizens in Algiers while they keep enslaving Africans in their so-called land of liberty. Canto Two of the poem gives voice to a black slave in the United States. The poet starts the canto with addressing directly to the reader, “Now gentle reader, think thy task not hard/ Awhile to listen to sable bard” (AA: 262) who is going to defend the lost cause of “his hapless race” (Ibid.). The poet wants the black narrator’s voice be heard by the American readers, who are being outraged by the North African slavery but unaware or ignorant of the slavery that prevails within their own nation. They are tricked by “the inconsistency of those/ Feigned friends to Liberty, feigned slavery’s foes” (Ibid.). The poet refers to the hypocrisy of the slave holders in America and their government which does by no means prohibit this slavery. The poet calls them to be aware that America is “thronged with slaves” (Ibid.). The idea of the inhumanity of the slavery practice in the United States was scarcely popular if compared to that of the Americans in Algiers. Therefore, the poet “shall dare address /A world of **critics**, and her thoughts express, / The envenom’d source of every ill to trace “(Ibid.; emphasis added). The poet is aware that the issue of black slavery in the United States he (or she) is advancing is controversial and knows that the poem will

face the criticism of many proponents of slavery. These are all those people who are taking advantage of the principles of the Constitution of the United States and the Declaration of Independence, which ensure liberty and the pursuit of happiness of the Americans but do nothing to turn the African slaves free.

The Political Roots of Slavery in Algiers and America

The American in Algiers is a poem not about white slavery in Algiers exclusively but about black slavery in the United States. The author starts the poem with narrating about the sufferings of an American veteran of the war for Independence in the yoke of slave holding Algerians so as to make the American slave holders aware of the inhumanity of what they are enduring upon the blacks in America. He (or she) explains the enslavement of the Americans by the Algerians through the political circumstances that prevail in their country. Therefore, the poet depicts the sharp contrast between America's ideal of liberty and Algiers' so-called oppressive powers. The narrator of canto one was once a freeman thanks to their fight against Britain, "the tyrant Cage" (AA: 253). He participated in this fight which inaugurated America as a land of liberty. The Constitution of the young nation claims this liberty to be "the birthright of Columbia's sons" (Ibid. 252). This means that the Constitution ensures that every American is entitled with the right to freedom. The poet is paraphrasing the ideas of such poets as David Humphreys who considers the people of the United States as "freedom's heirs" (Humphreys, 1804: 30) and "Blest if they knew to them alone 'tis given" this Liberty so fundamental to the Constitution upon which the government operates and which inspires from the Declaration of Independence, "Our Constitution form'd on Freedom's base" (Ibid.). The poet also

paraphrases the two founding texts of the American nation which made of the liberty of the Americans their objective.

However, far from the democratic nation, the Americans are enslaved by the so-called terror and tyranny of the Algerians. When the poet speaks about Algiers, he (or she) uses words like “tyrants rod” (AA: 251), “tyrant’s chain” (Ibid. 259) and “thankless tyrant in Algiers” (Ibid. 260), which embody the consideration of Algiers as an enemy of Liberty contrary to the United States. Indeed, this conforms to the mainstream depiction of the rulers of Algiers and other Oriental powers as despotic rulers, who supposedly only to terror and violence they pledged allegiance. In the American mainstream culture, there was this tendency to consider the Oriental powers like Algiers as enemies to liberty. John B. Wolf (1979) explains this by the idea that the “real authority in the regency [of Algiers] was exercised by the dey” and the appointed “ministers” who “serve at his pleasure” (1979: 292). Therefore, they were authorised to encourage the so-called piracy to enrich their ruler. The capture and enslavement of Westerners like the Americans offered an opportunity for this. It means that the practice of slavery had an institutional status in the North African powers not like in the United States, David Humphreys and others might say.

The writer of the poem conforms to this portrayal of Algiers like many other American poets, former captives and statesmen. For instance, David Humphreys draws a distinction between the encroachment of this love and protection of liberty in the institutions of the land with the prevalence of oppression and barbarism in Algiers. He writes, “We lack the gaudy pomp that wails/ On Eastern Monarchs, or despotic states; / Yet well we spare what realms despotic feel, / Oppression’s scourge and

persecution's wheel" (1804: 37). What is important to say is that in paraphrasing the mainstream culture, the poet aspires to show the hypocrisy that is the Americans', who are supposedly enemies of terror and friends of liberty, while the institutions of their republic exclude the black race from this emancipatory project. Later on in 1798, John Foss published his *Journal of the Captivity* where he narrates his years of captivity in Algiers from 1793 to 1797. He concludes it with a sharp contrast between the United States and Algiers. Thanks to the "Republican government of the United States [which] set an example of humanity to all governments of the world" (Foss, 1999: 95), he was released to "enjoy Liberty; the greatest blessing human beings ever possessed" while in Algiers he "had been suffering the most inhuman slavery" (Ibid. 99-100). Nevertheless, the poet does not agree with the idea that the United States was an *absolute* land of liberty.

As a matter of fact, the poet starts by addressing his (or her) critique towards the members of the American government in the United States and abroad as diplomats so as to plead the cause of the black slaves. Statesmen like Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and David Humphreys, among others, made of the happiness of their fellow citizens their essence. They started this with the drafting of the Declaration of Independence and its framers' devotion to release the American captives in North Africa. However, they say nothing about the black slaves within their own nation. The poet writes,

Ye rev'rent Sages! Who first fram'd the plan,
 And rear'd the fabric of the rights of man,
 To you I speak, in truths undaunted tone,
 And plead the cause of Afric's injure'd sons. (AA: 264)

The poet is outraged by the fact that the Declaration of Independence was an “instrument” supposed to contain “The Laws of Nature, and the Rights and Man” (Ibid.) to “bind our Africans in slavery’s chain” (Ibid.). He (or she) wants them to recognize their “shame” (Ibid. 265) that “by [their] declaration we are made free” but “Afric’s sons continue slaves to be” (Ibid). The Constitution of the United States, too, contains an inconsistency in its defence of the rights of man by authorizing the enslavements of a portion of the human race by another. The fact is that its framers made it clear that their objective was to “secure the blessings of liberty to **ourselves** and our **posterity**” (Government of the United States, 1979: 11). As all these were white Americans, they did not integrate the welfare and liberty of the blacks to their project. The shame is that one of the framers of the founding principles of the American nation namely George “WASHINGTON possesses a slave” (AA: 266). This suggests that the government neglects the natural rights of the blacks. There is no care for their freedom and right to the pursuit of happiness and equality to other men and women. Don E. Fehrenbacher argues that the the “framers [of the Constitution] entertained no thought of trying to abolish slavery but left the institution unmolested as a creature of state law” (2001: 39-40).

In making their nation full of black slaves, the Americans conform to despotic rules like the so-called North Africans. And it is another inconsistency to despise the latter’s while they follow the same lines. The poet, in fact, is criticizing all those voices in the members of the American government who are outraged by the North African despotic rules while they are perpetuating the same principles within their own government.

The poet tells them that it is needless to “let your soul despotic laws despise/ Since as despotic ones yourself devise” (AA: 266). The despotism the poet refers to concerns the institutionalization of black slavery in the States in the same way as the North African rulers were encouraging the capture and enslavement of Americans, among other Christians. David Humphreys, for instance, considers that the American government is far from being a despotic republic. He writes, “We lack the gaudy pomp that wails/ On Eastern Monarchs, or despotic states; / Yet well we spare what realms despotic feel, / Oppression’s scourge and persecution’s wheel” (1804: 37). However, for the poet this same government deprives the blacks from their natural right to liberty and “insult daily with oppression blend; / Kings of your **kitchens**, say tyrannic lords” (AA: 266; emphasis added). The emphasised word *kitchen* is metaphorical in meaning, suggesting the idea that the enemies to liberty are endemic to the framers of the institutions of the government of the United States. It can also be said that the poet is calling those at home who are boasting of the happiness that is theirs thanks to the principles of their nation while these same principles exclude the black race who are turned slaves. The poet, in fact, addresses those writers and statesmen who insist upon the “*heimlich* pleasures” of their land of freedom and the “*unheimlich* terror of the space or race” of the Algerians who are enslaving their fellow citizens as their own land of liberty deprives the blacks from their own liberty (Bhabha, 1990: 2).

The Religious Roots of Black and White Slavery: Muslim and Christian Masters

In addition to the political institutions which encouraged the slavery practice, there was the religious one. In North Africa,

there was a tendency to associate the capture of Westerners with the teachings of Islam which was misinterpreted to enslave every non-Muslim. In fact, the Westerners being Christians were considered as infidels, and for that they had to suffer from the terror of the Muslims. The emergence of the North African captivity crisis soon after the independence of the United States was related to the Manichean dialectic between the Christians and the Muslims. The majority of the narratives about the crisis along with the political discourse explained the crisis from a religious perspective and insisted upon the idea that the dictates of the Islamic religion propelled the Algerians to capture and enslave every person that was not Muslim. They were considered as enemies to their religion, so they had to be enslaved by the Muslims. The piety of the latter made them obey the dictates. The idea is that the writings within this tradition considered Islam as the enemy of liberty, and the enslavement of the Christians was a way through which this is expressed. Violence and barbarism are also associated with this religion. Ever since the first encounter between the Islam and Christianity, according to Edward Said, the former is reduced to a “handful of stereotypes, and generalizations about faith, its founder, and all its people [along with] its violence, primitiveness, atavism, threatening qualities” (1997: xvi.).

The American in Algiers carries this message as the narrator of canto one relates his capture and enslavement to the dictates of Islam. He speaks about one of his captors as “bloody Mussulman” (AA: 258). The association of blood with the Muslims is a way of saying that their religion preaches violence against the non-Muslims. On behalf of the Dey of Algiers, the narrator says, “My God commanded, and Mahomet gave/ Full

leave to make each infidel a slave” (Ibid. 259). It means that it is the Islamic religion that preaches the enslavement of the Christians, which became an act of faith for the rulers of Algiers and the sea captains who captured the Christians. The writer of the poem was not the only one to voice this idea. John Foss starts his *Journal* with a demonization of the Muslims of Algiers. He holds that their religion teaches them to “persecute all its opposers” (1999: 73). Therefore, the Algerians are created as the antithesis of the Christians, and they are demonized for their religious background. This drawn contrast between the Algerians and the Christians is sharpened with the captivity crisis, as the American captives regarded their captors as the enemies of Christianity in the first place and of the United States in the second.

The writer of the poem shows that the religious drives behind the emergence of the slavery practice are not restricted to the Muslims; the Christians, too, refer to religion to serve their so-called humanitarian project, the smokescreen behind the enslavement of the Africans. There is hypocrisy on the part of the Americans to be outraged by the enslavement of their citizens by the Muslims while they contribute in the implementation of slavery in their own soil. Like the so-called ‘barbarous and bloody’ Muslims, the black narrator of canto two considers that the Christians are also engaged in vile and inhumane practices in the name of religion,

Such are the boasted virtues that possess
 These pious scourgers of the human race;
 Their title such, to fair unsullied fame,
 Which zones and climes, and distant realms proclaim;
 Such are the murders---such the deeds of blood,

Vile Christians perpetrate to serve their God.

(AA: 164)

For the poet, the enslavement of the Africans by the Christians has religious connotations as it is an act of faith and piety in the same way as it is for the Muslims. The poem explains the link between religion and slavery by accounting for the appropriation of Christianity as a means to subjugate people by the Christian powers, starting with the Spanish. During many years, the Spanish had been subduing or exterminating the Latin Americans in the name of Christianity in the colonial period. And now the poet says that the teachings of the Bible are being misinterpreted to enslave the Africans, who are brought from Africa to the United States on the basis that they were pagan and as such they deserved to be converted to their faith. In this perspective, Philip Gould argues that Canto Two's "African speaker turns around the argument about the barbarity of Christian manners to highlight" (Gould, 2003: 95) the problem of slavery in the American republic.

What is important to keep in mind is that the poet draws parallels between the enslavement of the blacks by the Americans with that endured upon the Americans in Algiers so as to bring the issue of black slavery into the American conscience. The poet reveals the hypocrisy and inconsistency behind the humanitarian precept as it rather enslaves the blacks. Whether the factors behind them are religious or political, the poet insists upon the fact that the result is the same, namely the implementation of systems that are inhuman. Therefore, it is important that the enslavement of the blacks on the American soil be recognised as such instead of being committed only to the suffering of the Americans in Algiers so as to obtain its

abolition. While white slavery in Algiers received a great of interest in the States, that of the blacks remained ignored. It is only through efforts like the poet's that it could be expressed, which he (or she) does by drawing the analogy between the two, focusing on the process of enslavement, its political and religious drives and especially its inhumanity.

The Enslavement of the Americans and the Blacks and the Inhumanity of the Practice

The poet carries on the analogy between white slavery in Algiers with black slavery in the United States by exposing the process through which the free men and women are turned slaves and the inhumanity they face when they become slaves. The American slave in canto one is transferred from the state of free man into slave in Algiers in the same way as the African is 'shipped' to America as property without any human dignity. To begin with the former, soon after his capture at sea, to a "public auction" in the city of Algiers (AA: 260) he was brought so as to be sold as property to the "best bidder" (Ibid.). This process of enslaving the Americans involves their dehumanisation through making them properties instead of persons. This non-respect for the human dignity of the slave is all the more showy in the way they are treated by the common people in the streets of Algiers and their masters. In fact, the suffering of the slaves in captivity has different aspects which are either physical or moral. Through "the streets insulted all the way" to the Dey of Algiers he was brought to be sold (Ibid. 259). Once the property of the best bidder, he is mistreated through overwork, starvation and punishment. Also he had to endure solitude away from his relatives and friends in America. The poet shows how hard the

white slaves' condition is in Algiers. The American deplores his situation as a slave in Algiers,

Naked and hungry, days, and months, and years,
 I've serv'd this thankless tyrant in Algiers;
 My naked back oft' feels with keenest smart
 The pow'rful lash that pierces to the heart;
 Laborious days, and restless nights, in tears,
 Chain'd in a dungeon, wear away my years;
 My nightly cell is hung with cobwebs round,
 A stone my pillow, and my bed the ground;
 Absorbed in grief, I spend each hapless hour,
 Sigh for lost friends, and my sad fate deplore:
 My lov'd Rosina, and my infants, oh!
 My soul runs frantic when I think of you;

(Ibid. 260-261)

To raise anti-slavery concerns in the American people, the poet juxtaposes the sufferings of the Americans under slavery in Algiers to the suffering of the blacks in the United States. He (or she) shows that like the Americans in Algiers the blacks have been happily in harmony with nature in Africa before they were turned captives followed by inhumane slavery in the States. The black narrator says that they used to be "the happiest of the human kind [...] But oh! What mis'ries tread on heels of joy! / How soon dark clouds oft' veil the beauteous sky" of Africa and its people (Ibid. 269). This happy life was to be troubled by the coming of a vile race "well arm'd, who ev'ry side assail" (Ibid. 270). In fact, the inhumanity of the slave traders like the American planters expresses itself in their treatment of every son and daughter of Africa as neither "age nor sex they spare" (Ibid). The speaker himself has seen "his lovely bride/ By ruffian hands,

insulted, seiz'd, and ty'd" to see her lover made prisoner and brought to the States as a slave. Like the Americans under the North Africans, they are put in vessels of shame to be mistreated onboard, "Parching with thirst, and threat'ned with starvation" (Ibid). They leave their family and relatives in woe and misery to ensure the pursuit of the 'happiness of others' by working for them days and nights as slaves. About his bride, the speaker says that often "her agonizing cries [he hears]" (Ibid. 271) miles away in slavery.

Like the Americans in Algiers, the blacks are soon brought to the slave markets on America's shores to be sold as goods for future slaveholders:

Each jockey views the slaves before he buys;
Tears from one family a tender mother,
A father, wife, or sister from another;
A father, mother, sister, self, and wife,
To diff'rent ones were sold, and sold for life
(Ibid. 271)

The poet here describes the way in which Africa's sons and daughters are torn from their families and made slaves in the States without any human consideration. They are to become the properties of those Americans forever. The poet through the voice of the black speaker considers these slave owners as "savage brutes" like the "savage" masters of Algiers. He and the other newly enslaved blacks are overworked and starved.

Similarly, the speaker of canto one says, "I brav'd, and purchas'd freedom with my blood; / This mangled body now with chains opprest/ to end my days in slavery in Algiers" (Ibid. 255). Like any piece of writing about white slavery in Algiers,

the poem insists upon the sufferings of the American slave under the oppressive power of the Algerian master. The narrator of poem, the slave himself, addresses to his compatriots, insisting upon the happiness that is theirs and the woe that is his because of being enslaved in Algiers while in America the Constitution made it a principle of its to ensure the pursuit of happiness for every son of Columbia. It is said, “[w]hile you my countrymen each blessing share, / I claim the gen’rous sympathetic tear, While free as wind/ you rove from pole to pole, (No locks, nor bars, nor dungeons to control)/ Trembling I bend beneath a tyrants rod,/ While you enjoy prosperity and ease” (Ibid. 251). This part of the poem which depicts the inhuman treatment of the enslaved American captives conforms to the descriptions the captives were sending home. In his journal, John Foss writes, “[i]t was soothing to find a spark of humanity in my barbarous masters” (1998: 75). Besides, when the poem was produced the United States was still coping with the question of the Algerian captives. Therefore, a spate of writings was produced to voice America’s outrage against the enslavement of its citizens in Algiers. David Humphreys, for instance, reproduces this same idea in his poems about the happiness and glory of America as he demarcates in poetic terms the transfer of free Americans into slavery in North Africa. In “On the Future Glory of the United States” (1783), he condemns the “pirate race” (1804: 52) that “have seiz’d our ships and made our freemen slaves” (Ibid. 51). Nevertheless, what Humphreys does not say is that there were in the United States people that resembled the so-called “pirate race”, and these involve all those people who either owned and exploited black slaves or provided institutional support to the practice of slavery while they were being outraged by the

enslavement of their fellow citizens in Algiers. *The American in Algiers* reveals this inconsistency so as to bring the cause of the black race to the American scene.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, it is clear that the poet in *The American in Algiers* conveys an abolitionist appeal against the enslavement of the blacks in the United States. Though poetic in form, the poem conveys this message through appropriating the captivity narrative genre that was popularised in the early beginnings of the American republic. While the genre was more related to the white captives in North Africa, the poet removes the centre of interest from the white American captives to the black slaves in the United States by giving voice to the latter. Therefore, the poem becomes a kind of precursor to the slave narrative genre that was popularised later on in the nineteenth century with Frederick Douglass and others. Its abolitionist message is also a kind of forerunner for the abolitionist movement that started to be emphatic with activists like William Lloyd Garrison in the same century. The idea is that the poet is one of those early Americans to rise against slavery in the United States.

Works Cited

- Anonymous, (1797), *The American in Algiers, or the Patriot of Seventy-Six in Captivity* (Online) Available: <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/teachers/scholars/HSP03.EAA9.Guster.pdf> (Accessed in October 2011)
- Baepler, Paul, Edr (1999), *White Slaves, African Masters: an Anthology of American Barbary Captivity Narratives*, Chicago: the University of Chicago Press.
- Barry, Peter (1995), "New Historicism and Cultural Materialism" in *Beginning Theory*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- Bertens, Hans (2001), "Literature and Culture: the New Historicism and Cultural Materialism" in *Literary Theory: the Basics*, London: Routledge.
- Bhabha, Homi, (1990), *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge.
- Fehrenbacher, Don E. (2001), *The Slaveholding Republic: an Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foss, John, (1999) "A Journal of the Captivity and Suffering of Josh Foss" in *White Slaves, African Masters: an Anthology of American Barbary Captivity Narratives*, Paul Baepler (Edr), Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1798.
- Gould, Philip (2003), *Barbaric Traffic: Commerce and Antislavery in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Guster, Micah (2005), "Introduction" to *The American in Algiers*, Online Available:
<http://www.gilderlehrman.org/teachers/scholars/HSP03.EAA9.Guster.pdf> (Accessed in October 2011)
- Humphreys, David (1804) "On the Happiness of America" in *The Miscellaneous Works of David Humphreys*, Ney York: T and G Words, 1786.
- , (1804) "On the Future Glory of the United States" in *The Miscellaneous Works of David Humphreys*, Ney York: T and G Words, 1983.
- Said, Edward W. (1997), *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine the Way We See the Rest of the World*, New York: Vintage Books.
- United States Government (1979), *The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America*, Washington: United States Government Printing Office.
- Wolf, John B. (1979), *The Barbary Coast: Algiers Under the Turks 1500 to 1800*, New York: W. W. Norton and Company.