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## THE TRIPLE JEOPARDY IN MARGARET WALKER'S JUBILEE

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**Abstract:** Margret Walker's Jubilee is a massive historical novel that deals with the odyssey of black women's suffering and endurance. It is the great civil war novel, based on the true life story of the author's great-grandmother. The author focuses on the intimate picture of life in Georgia plantation from a Negro point of view. In Jubilee, Walker presents the first major neo-slave narratives and their travel from bondage to freedom. In essence, Jubilee narrates much about the black experience during a crucial period in the history of Black People. In the novel the author compares Biblical analogy of Hebrews in Egypt with black life in America. The protagonist of the novel evolves as a heroic symbol of the black woman whose Christian faith, humanism, courage; resourcefulness not only formed the bedrock of her survival but also for her kind. Jubilee takes place during the time of the civil war and reconstruction where violence from Ku Klux Klan was unfortunately common. Jubilee is a novel of celebration and culmination Walker's style reflects the development and tradition of black women novelists. '

Black literature has always been implicated in the freedom struggle and black women writers have always tried to reconstruct their own historical past in their fictions. The primary inspiration and intent for writing was to enlighten the world about the oppression of black people and to enlist the world in the eradication of that oppression. The pragmatism is that the women are no longer considered a slave of a man: intellectually, socially and financially. Their horrendous experiences compel them to attain self-emancipation. Her task is to create a fiction from the oral history of her family and the recorded history of the nation.

**Keywords:** Black Humanism, Black woman, Civil war, Endurance, Racism, Slavery, Sexism, Self-emancipation

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Margaret Abigail Walker was a poet, novelist, essayist, critic and educator. She was born on July 7, 1915 in Birmingham, Alabama. In 1935, at the age of twenty, she joined the Federal Writers Project in Chicago where she worked with great black writers like Gwendolyn Brooks and Richard Wright. With the publication of Jubilee, Walker became the first Afro-American to win the Yale series of Younger Poets award. Afro- American culture is portrayed in Margaret Walker's writings. She is probably best known for her poetry *For My People* (1942) her signature poem, offers a hymn of praise for the dignity, the endurance and the superhuman strength of Afro-Americans who are "Singing their songs more repeatedly", songs of transcendence that seek to make sense out of oppression. Women play pivotal roles in Walker's Poetry. 'Lineage' enunciates Walker's connection with her matrilineal heritage, and folk ballads such as "Mollymeans" suggest Walker's belief in conjure women's unparalleled power. Walker's literary influence derives from her compact, spare, accessible language and style. Walker always intended Jubilee to be a folk novel based on folk material, folk-saying, folk belief and folk ways. She wanted the book to be realistic and humanistic. She compared Biblical analogy of Hebrews in Egypt with black life in America in the novel. Jubilee, with its outright celebration of progress in the struggle for racial justice and harmony within the black community, set in the years immediately preceding, during and following the civil war, is clearly a product of the mountain top visions of the mid-sixties. It is a

novel which is mainly concerned with facts in fiction. Walker says about the genesis of the novel that long before her story had a name, "I was living with it and imagining its reality" (1972: 5). She reveals that it is a life's work which originated in the stories of her maternal great-grandmother, Elvira Ware Dozier, who kept young Margaret up past bed time with tales of slavery times. Elvira is the indomitable Vry of Jubilee. Grandma, as young Margaret called her, believed in telling the naked truth declaring "I am not telling her tales; I'm telling her the naked truth" (1972: 12). This novel is about race and class in the South during the period before, during and after the civil war. It also projects the ambivalent relationship between black and white southern women during the civil war. As a novel of celebration of racial progress, its characters are representative and typical of their time in history and place in society. As Walker suggests it is about a novel of culmination, a life's work: "So, when I say that I have been writing Jubilee all my life, it is literally true. It has been a consuming ambition, driving me relentlessly" (1972: 23). In *How I Wrote Jubilee*, she discussed the major elements of the novel and told the story of her long years of research. Her novel is different from the usual Civil War romance. In that she was telling the story from a slave's point of view. She wanted the story not only to be the tale of one slave's life but of an entire culture.

Walker's novel is about race and class in the South during the period, before and after the Civil War; yet her writings and speeches throughout her life

articulate Jubilee's ultimate messages – that, as Walker puts it, “history is not just one solid page of black and white”, that forgiveness is possible, that love is redemptive and regenerative (Giovanni, 1974: 16). In Walker's dialogue with Nikki Giovanni, recorded in *A Poetic Equation*, Walker stresses the importance of the black woman's perspective: “I'm interested in the black woman in fiction perhaps because I'm a black woman and feel that the black woman's story has not been told, has not been dealt with adequately” (1974: 55). Phyllis Klotman has rightly pointed out that the novel presents History from the black women's perspective and Vvry is the focus—moral, physical and spiritual in Jubilee (1977: 139-45). From the death of her mother Sis Hetta in 1839 to the imminent birth of her fourth child at the end of Saga, we see the events of thirty years through the eyes of this larger than life black woman of Nineteenth century Deep South (1977: 140).

Jubilee is about Vvry's movements from slavery through the vicissitudes of war to freedom. Through different ups and downs of her life, she gathers strength and self-knowledge. And as her white masters meet their hard days, she takes charge of their welfare as well as her own and that of her children. In the novel, she, like a real black woman comes to know herself and her own capacities for endurance and love. Thus, it is a novel of Vvry's becoming (quoted in Gwin Minrose C. 1985: 154). Vvry's willingness to help white women through war, poverty and childbirth becomes, in Walker's vision, a peculiarly female regenerative process that saturates and dilutes racial bitterness through sisterhood and maternal nurturance (1985: 153). Thus, Walker projects the basic reconciliatory approach of humanism. The heroine Vvry, who survives and endures white cruelty and oppression, is a human being who returns love for hatred. Arthur Davis suggests that Walker's characters – “black and white are stereotypes based on Southern myth” (1974: 184). Walker plunges into the historical period when the negative images of Afro-American took hold, and as such she went to the root of the old stereotypes and explored the many dimensions of their consciousness and craft.

Jubilee is carried through three parts – ‘The Ante Bellum Years’, ‘The Civil War Years’ and ‘The Reconstruction Years’. Each of the novel's three parts could stand alone as a novella. . The novel is set in rural South-west Georgia and nearby Alabama communities in the South which was associated with extreme racism. The novel opens with the death of Sis Hetta who after some fifteen debilitating pregnancies, dies in childbirth before her thirtieth birthday. She had been the mistress of John Dutton, the master of a Georgia plantation since her early

adolescence. After her death, the child is taken to the Big House, where she spends most of her time trying to stay out of the way of Dutton's wife Salina, the ‘Big Missy’ of the plantation. Salina takes pleasure in tormenting the child whose pale face is a flesh-and-blood emblem of her husband's infidelity. Big Missy is a Christian but lacks love for Vvry. She is a woman of steel and a fictional exaggeration of glorified white Southern womanhood. Grimes, the Master's overseer of slave labour describes Salina as: “Missy Salina Dutton is, a fine, good lady she nurses the sick far and wide, white and black she knows how to handle niggers and keep a big establishment; how to set a fine table, and act morally decent like a first- class lady. She's a real Christian woman, a Bible-reading, honest-dealing, high-quality lady who knows and acts the difference between niggers and white people. She ain't no nigger-loving namby-pamby like that s.o.b. Pretty boy she's married to. She knows how to lay the law down to niggers and keep her business to herself” (p.26). As long as she lives, the slaves on her plantation are coerced and whipped in line. Grimes, who serves as the overseer of slave labour on Dutton's plantation, characterizes the epitome of an executor of exploitation, who talks of black slaves as “They is evil, and they is ignorant and the blacker they is the more evil; lazy, trifling liars, every one of them” (28). Salina's Christianity is an ironic contrast to her tortures of Vvry. Salina forces hard work on Vvry though she is a child. When Vvry forgets to empty the chamber pot from the room of her half - Sister Lillian, Big Missy throws the contents in her face. Soon after the death of Vvry's first surrogate mother, Mammy Suckey, the girl has the misfortune to break one of the Salina's China dishes. Big Missy responds by hanging the child by her hands in a closet, when she loses consciousness. Dutton rescues Vvry, and forbids his wife to mistreat her, not so much on humane grounds, but because “Someday she'll be grown up and worth much as a slave” (37). Salina associates Vvry with her husband's sexual appetites, and vows to “kill her and all other yellow bastards like her” (37). By all natural laws, the white woman, Salina as the wife of Vvry's father has certain maternal obligations to Vvry, the mulatto orphan. But she refuses to fulfill any of those. Young Vvry has two surrogate mothers. Mammy Suckey, whose death leaves her devastated and more important, and Aunt Sally, the Dutton Cook in whose cabin Vvry receives food, warmth, cooking lessons and maternal affection.

Without informing Vvry, the Duttons decide to sell Aunt Sally. As her black mother is dragged away sobbing pitifully, young Vvry cannot absorb the horrible reality of the experience. Vvry tries to go with Aunt Sally but she is slapped by Big Missy. In

the first section of the book, Walker indicates the cruelty meted out to Vry by her Big Missy. First Vry serves as playmate to her own half sister, then as kitchen help and finally as the family's cook. In her sixteenth year, she replaces Aunt Sally as Cook in the Big house. Until fifteen, Vry associates freedom with miracle. She tried to imagine what it meant to be free. She had never before entertained the faintest idea or hope of freedom except as some dream or an answer to a prayer. She is, however drawn to Randall Ware, a free black who promises her freedom: "If you would marriage with me, I'd buy your freedom!" (88). She asks John Dutton's permission to marry Randall Ware. He gives her permission to keep relationship with Randall Ware and to raise their children. She marries Randall Ware and gives birth to two children. And Dutton promises to free her – but only after his death.

The position of a free Negro in the ante-bellum South was tenuous at best, and Randall Ware's covert operations with the abolitionists and the Underground Railroad finally put his life in great jeopardy. He decides that he can no longer stay in the South, and he urges Vry to leave the children and escape with him. But her maternal feelings override the desire for freedom. In an attempt to escape with her children she was caught and beaten by Grimes, the overseer. After three days, she is able to examine herself and sees "where one of the lashes had left a loose flap of flesh over her breast like tuck in a dress. It healed that way" (174). She wondered why she was still living, because they must have meant to kill her. "Why has God let me live?" All the black people must be scared to come and get me till it is black dark. Maybe they think I'm dead. Lawd, have mercy, Jesus! send somebody to get me soon, please Jesus!" (174). At the end of Part-I, Vry has exhausted the limits of personal freedom within a slave society. But the slave conditions continue for Vry even after "The Civil War Years" (part-II) also. Although, John Dutton dies, his slaves are not freed and Big Missy Salina has her last wish. "She would never live to see niggers free and living like white folks." (224).

In Part-II, "The Civil War years" composed in early 1965, Vry's desire for freedom is replaced by a struggle for survival, as she works to hold together the white family on which she and her children depend. In the course of war, the Dutton family slowly disintegrates. Marse John, Salina's son dies after an injury; her son-in-law receives fatal wounds in a battle which result in his death. With the sound of "big yankee guns" firing in the distance Miss Salina suffers a deadly stroke and her daughter Lillian sustains a head injury and permanent brain damage when a Yankee soldier rapes her. After this sequence

of disasters, Vry takes care of her half-sister Lillian, her children and the plantation.

Vry moves with her children to the Big house to take care of her white sister. As Lillian, a symbolic wreck of the Old South, sinks deeper and deeper into madness, Vry – an emblem of budding New South shelters and nurtures her. She becomes more of a concerned mother to Lillian than the selfish Salina ever was. Yet, regardless of her sister's efforts, Lillian slips further into permanent lethargy. Thus the midsection of the Saga is Vry's ascendancy. She moves from the frightened slave child who ducks behind corners to avoid Big Missy to the mainstay of what is left of the white family. Her endurance is the thread which knits this section – and the whole novel together into a rendering of the indomitability of the Afro-American heritage. When it appears that Randall Ware is not returning for her and the children, Innis Brown, who has helped her on the plantation, persuades her to marry him and to leave to find their own home. Yet Vry doesn't desert her sister. She waits in the Big house until Lillian's relatives come to fetch her.

Walker presents many of the 'Poor Whites' of rural Georgia and Alabama after the war as being in a worse condition than Vry and her family. Vry and Innis along with the children leave Georgia, bound for Alabama. They find themselves wandering in the wilderness from Abbeville to Troy to Luverne to Greenville and finally reaching Cannan. Often, too, white share croppers are depicted as having intense anger against the newly freed blacks, of the economic competition they pose. But throughout her travels with Innis Brown in their search for permanent home, Vry carries over that same openness to comfort and support a white woman of share cropper class, regardless of racial hatred. Vry helps out a white family living in a share cropper's shack with food, because she recognizes their poverty and hunger.

Her relationship with another white woman Mrs. Jacobson is also healthy. Vry was appointed as a cook to that family. They allow Vry to bring her three children to work with her and she is sympathetic to the idea of elementary education for blacks. She even promises to find a book for Vry's daughter Minna. But when Vry wants to quit her employment to help Innis, Mrs. Jacobson becomes bitter and accusatory. She complains: "I understand how you colored people don't want to work the way you useta. What's more you won't work the way you useta. You expect everything to come dropping in your laps, houses and land and schools and churches and money, and you want to leave the white people holding the bag" (373) The message of Mrs. Jacobson's disgruntlement is that any white female's

relationships with a black woman must be predicated on her staying in her place as servant and caretaker of white interests. Vryy breaks the code. She seeks new life and new codes with white women. Vryy and Innis Brown become the victims of Ku Klux Klan violence, when the Klan people burn down their house. Throughout these hardships, though, Vryy responds to the needs of white women while at the same time retaining her own sense of self. Mrs. Jacobson, the white woman who has been so hostile to Vryy before, sends bedding and clothing to the distraught family. She also gives money to them to travel. Vryy has absolute clarity about her own identity. She does not feel bad being a mulatto and a member of mixed blood. When called prudish and proud of her fair skin, Vryy proclaims to her lover, "You done called me a white folks' nigger and throwed up my color in my face because my dady was a white man. He wasn't no father to me; he was my master" (397).

Thus, she enumerates the wrongs done to her on her master's plantation and bears the scars she received, identifying herself fully with black experience and black identity. It is her relationship with a young white woman and their common experience with the struggles of giving birth that reverse the force of racism which has swept the Browns from "pillar to post". In one of her trips into the white settlement, she becomes an emergency "granny" to a young woman. Probably she plays the role of the mid-wife. She cares for the young mother and child, and misses church on the following day to return to check on Betty Alice Fletcher and her baby. Innis scolds her for missing the church and she articulates with her philosophy. In a dramatic scene Vryy, whom the Fletchers assume, is white listens to racist myth from the mouth of the white woman whose baby she has delivered. Betty-Alice parrots her husband's assertions that "all black nigger men wants white women" and "nigger mens is got tails" (430). Vryy can stand no more and discloses her racial identity and the falseness of these myths. To the Fletchers and to Betty-Alice's parents, Vryy discloses in a flood of frustration and despair her feeling about the racism and violence she and her family had to endure. Linked to the whole family, particularly to Betty Alice, through her participation in their regeneration in the birth of child, she calls upon each of them to acknowledge her humanity and that of her family. "Well, ma'am, I is. I wasn't trying to hide my race from nobody, cause I ain't ashamed to be colored, but I does feel real bad and hurt deep down inside when I goes around and hears all the things the white folks is saying bout the colored peoples. What's so bad and what hurts so much is half the time they don't know what they talking about they

doesn't even much know us and what they saying is all lies they has heard and stuff they has made up (432)."

To Vryy, Betty Alice's mother responds: "Well, I'm sorry to hear that. I can, tell you is a good woman and a Christian woman, too. I thank God for what you done for my child and I wants you to know I wishes you well" (433). The common female experience of giving birth results in a meaningful interracial communication between Vryy and the two white women. Randalls Ware like Vryy underestimates the tenacity of racism. As a propertied free black, Ware is a ready target for racist terrorism. According to him, it is a reign of terror to put the Negro back in slavery. Randall Ware who is assumed to be dead comes back to take his son for schooling. Vryy bristles when Ware refers to her sister Lillian as stupid, and harshly criticizes his willingness "to try to beat the whiteman at his own game with his killing and his hating" (482). According to him whites only used black for their own reasons. His heart was filled with hatred towards white people. Vryy, shows herself to be truly a spiritual paragon. Vryy's act of forgiveness is not a passive acceptance of white cruelty, but an assertion of ontological black self in the face of it. She reveals the basic human beauty and handsomeness the black women have carried in their hearts, though their hearts are swollen with the bitter and tormenting experiences.

Vryy at the end of Jubilee is expecting her fourth child. She remains content to stay with Innis Brown and raise their family rather than to unite with Randall Ware after his twelve years of absence. Vryy is the embodiment of the experience of the great group whose toilsome, tragic and glorious progress through time creates the central spiritual sensibility of the race. She becomes the triumphant heroine of that sensibility not mainly because she has experienced the racial ordeal of dissolution, absorption of disparities and conversion of experience into new possibilities, but because she becomes the racial prototype. In reconstructing her grandmother in the simple and forgiving Vryy, Walker writing most of her manuscript during the civil rights movement of sixties, appears to suggest black humanism as an answer to America's racial conflicts. Walker celebrates the black woman of yesterday rather than tomorrow. In fact, Vryy represents the image of the silent but constructive black women who have helped the retention of the families – both the whites and blacks. She is the person who retains the lost humanism of the human race even at the time when her basic humanity is challenged and rejected. She becomes the eternal

mother who has the potential to nurture, regenerate and rejuvenate human life.

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