

## **Black Woman Slaves and Subalternity: Reading Margaret Walker's *Jubilee***

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### **Abstract**

The Subaltern Studies introduced the trend of studying and rewriting "history from below." Challenging the traditional way of writing history, this school of thought focuses on and around the lives of the subaltern groups as an intrinsic part of historiography. The "neo-slave narratives" which emerged in the 1960's in America can be read within the paradigm of "history from below" as they serve as an alternate history of slavery narrated from the perspective of the oppressed slaves in contrast to the dominant whitewashed narrative of slavery written by the whites. Like other neo-slave narratives *Jubilee* which is written by the African American author Margaret Walker is also based on the real accounts of a former slave. In this paper a subaltern approach will be used in analysing *Jubilee* as a history of slavery which is narrated not from the perspective of white colonisers, slave owners, plantation owners or even black male slaves but from the perspective of a historical subaltern subject, a mulatto woman slave.

**Keywords:** Subaltern Studies, Slavery, Neo-slave Narratives, Alternate History, Black Woman Slaves,

Fugitive slaves and former slaves who escaped to their freedom in Northern America wrote autobiographical and personal accounts of their horrifying experiences in the nineteenth century when slavery had already been abolished decades ago in America. These narratives form important historical records on slavery as they are true first-hand testimonies of former slaves, and not a 'created' history of the white plantation owners and colonisers. These accounts debunked 'romanticised' and 'idealised' picture of the southern plantations projected in the plantation romances of the southern white authors such as George Tucker's *The Valley of the Shenandoah* (1824) and John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1832). The white plantocracy (the ruling social class made up of the plantation owners) and slave owners were given an image of a 'benevolent' master and slaves as 'contented' slaves. In

defending the lifestyle and tradition of the plantation, these romances created a flawless facade validating slavery which was in reality an institution which worked only in the favour of the whites. The slave narratives countered the master narratives by exposing the atrocity and brutality meted out to the slaves by their white masters. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: an American Slave* (1845) is one of the earliest slave narratives written by African-American orator and ex-slave Frederick Douglass. It serves as an important memoir recounting the horror of slavery that culminated in the annihilation of the identity of the enslaved people. This dehumanisation allowed the white owners to keep the slaves dominated and subjugated, and this authority was sustained by keeping them uneducated and illiterate. Douglass points out the vital role of education in preserving and safeguarding one's identity and subjectivity from any form of bondage. Moreover, his narrative celebrates and reclaims his African heritage which was entirely neglected and ridiculed during the dark years of slavery. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs like other slave narratives talks about racial discrimination, prejudice and abuses of slavery. However, Jacobs emphasises on the problems of slavery that were unique to women slaves like the sexual violation and objectification of slave women and the angst of mothers who were forcefully separated from their children. These slave narratives were invariably written with the intention of not only exposing the brutality of slavery but also compelling the white audience to reflect on their irrational racist attitude that they continue to exhibit even after the abolition of slavery.

Even in the contemporary time African-American writers continue to write on slavery and slave experiences from a distant temporal space where slavery no longer exists but the impact of the inhumane violence and oppression still lingers in the collective memory of the African-Americans. The ripple effect of slavery found its expression in a new form of writing called the "neo-slave narratives" which emerged in the 1960's in America. This literary genre is a fusion of real accounts and fiction. The term "neo-slave narratives" originated with Bernard W. Bell's 1987 book *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* where Bell describes neo-slave narratives as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (289). These narratives are created out of the dark past of slavery blending the narratives of former slaves and imagination of the writers. The 1960's, time of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power, provided the fertile ground for the evolution of the slave narratives into neo-slave narratives. These new narratives probe into the representation of slavery under postmodern perspectives. In her essay "Neo-slave Narratives," Valerie Smith gives her observation about neo-slave narratives:

They approach the institution of slavery from a myriad of perspectives and embrace a variety of styles of writing: from realist novels grounded in historical research to speculative fiction, postmodern experiments, satire, and works that combine these diverse modes. Their differences notwithstanding, these texts illustrate the centrality of the history and the memory of slavery to our individual, racial, gender, cultural, and national identities. (168)

The temporal distancing seems to give the writers a vantage point of being both an insider and an outsider allowing them to possess a greater objective, analytical and critical approach

towards the issue of racism which still prevails in the contemporary time. Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) also discusses the issues of racial identity and discrimination. However, she brings to the forefront the issue of black women rights and identity, which was somehow sidelined by the male African-American writers as well. *Jubilee* is the earliest neo-slave narrative written by a black woman writer in the twentieth century who dared to bring a black woman slave from the periphery right into the centre to narrate her story during slavery. Walker makes a subaltern subject the very fulcrum of her narration. Margaret reveals in her interview conducted by Claudia Tate in 1982 that she incorporated actual historical events into fictionalized life of her maternal great-grandmother Margaret Duggans, from slavery to the Reconstruction" (Graham 59). *Jubilee* is thus a neo-narrative created by mixing Walker's thirty years of research on slavery and fictionalisation of the history of her great grandmother, which was narrated to Walker by her grandmother Elvira War Dozier during her childhood. Walker believed that a novelist plays a greater role as compared to a historian: "more people will read a story than will read the actual history books... And, therefore, the novelist, as a social historian, has a job to do that the historian cannot do" (Graham 79). The historical trajectory from the "Antebellum Period", the "American Civil War" (1861-65) to the "Reconstruction Era" is served in a more fascinating format of a historical novel attracting more readers than any history book on slavery. Moreover, it can be said that *Jubilee* emerged in 1966 to reclaim the African American identity as this novel is deeply rooted in the Black oral tradition and folk culture.

Though "Subaltern" meaning "of inferior rank" is deployed for the first time by the Italian Marxist thinker and intellectual Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) to refer to those section of people in the society who are reduced to mere subjects to the hegemony of the ruling classes, the inception of the term subaltern as a postcolonial concept began in the late 1970s and early 1980s in India with the initiation of the project of Subaltern Studies. This scholastic venture headed by the historian Ranajit Guha aimed at reclaiming and rewriting the Indian historiography from the subaltern perspectives to counter the dominant history of Indian nationalism that discounted the contributions of the subaltern. Ranajit Guha sought "to rectify the elitist bias" (Guha vii) of this archived history which was "dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism" (Guha 1). This earnest attempt to recover the voice of the silenced groups grabbed attention from the increasingly growing scholarship on postcolonialism leading to the inclusion of "subaltern" in the discourse of Postcolonial Studies. Within the theoretical paradigm of postcolonialism, subaltern designates those silenced voiceless people who socially, politically and geographically exist outside of the hegemonic power structure. The subordination of these oppressed people may be on the lines of castes, class, gender or race. However, this concept of subaltern has achieved its currency and prominence with Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985) where Spivak reiterates the impossibility of the subaltern to speak. Moreover, Spivak insists on avoidance of the slack broad usage of "subaltern": "...subaltern is not just a classy word for "oppressed," for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie.... In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern" (Spivak & De Kock 45). Thus, though the

subaltern fits within the model of oppressor/oppressed, coloniser/colonised or self/other, they are further marginalised to the extent of being voiceless. Many writers have delved into the subject of subaltern and subalternity and attempted to represent them in their literary works. However, many critics finding this representation quite problematic often question whether non-subaltern writers who have never experienced subalternity able to do justice to the representation of multiply marginalised people in their writings or whether the subaltern who have started writing about their own life relocating themselves from the periphery to the centre can continue to be designated as subaltern.

As Subaltern Studies emphasise on the “history from below,” understanding history no longer means the “partial” history of the voiced centre but a “whole” history that is inclusive of the narratives of voiceless margins. The historical novel selected for analysis *Jubilee* (1966) by the African American writer Margaret Walker is a historical novel constructed against the backdrop of the Southern America when slavery was still in practice. It is a literary work that relates a history from below narrating the account of slavery from the perspective of the historically silenced subaltern subject, a woman slave.

*Jubilee* focuses on the day-to-day life of a female mulatto slave named Vyry, covering her story from her birth to her womanhood and also from her bondage to her escape and then to her freedom. A subversion of the mainstream history of slavery is found in the writer’s narrative technique of correlating the life trajectory of an ordinary slave girl Vyry to the major political changes taking place in America. This is reflected in the structuring of the novel which is divided chronologically into three parts:

- I. **Sis Hetta’s Child-The Ante-Bellum Years:** The first part talks about the circumstances of Vyry’s birth and her growing up as a slave girl in the Big House. It captures the glorious years of plantocracy in Georgia flourishing at the cost of the slaves who were subjected to brute violence and abuse without regret or hesitation.
- II. **“Mine eyes have seen the Glory”—The Civil War Years:** In the second part the development of war between the Confederates of the south and the Union Army of the north is reported. The decline of the plantocracy during the Civil War is reflected by the decline of the Dutton family as witnessed by Vyry.
- III. **“Forty years in the wilderness”—Reconstruction and Reaction:** The last part depicts the trials and tribulations faced by Vyry and her family to survive in new circumstances that prevailed during the Reconstruction: problems of poverty, racism, the wrath of the Ku Klux Klan and natural catastrophe. Thus, “the violence surrounding African Americans’ mobility and capacity to establish a homeplace of refuge and resistance merely changed forms after slavery, but certainly did not disappear” (Davis 35)

*Jubilee* has been interpreted as a counter narrative to Margaret Mitchell’s Civil War Romance *Gone with the Wind* (1936) as “they are both set in Georgia during and after the Civil War, they both combine the fictional and the documentary, and both are based on stories told to their authors during their childhoods” (Condé 212). The protagonist is Vyry a slave woman and not Scarlett O’Hara a white belle who talks about the high moral values of

the white plantation owners and presents an ideal picture of a peaceful coexistence between kind white plantation owners and happy compliant slaves. Also, Vryy is an opposite of the stereotypical Mammy figure who obediently serves Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind*. Vryy can be seen as an embodiment of a strong black woman slave who has the desire to be free from bondage; “a heroic symbol of the black woman whose Christian faith, humanism, courage, resourcefulness, and music are the bedrock of her survival and the survival of her people” (Bell 288). It can be said that a black woman slave is triply jeopardised owing to three oppressive forces acting upon her: slavery, race and gender, yet Walker chooses Vryy a highly marginalised subject to be her protagonist. By giving her a voice to express her wishes and desires, sufferings and pain, and happiness and sadness, Walker succeeds in reestablishing the fact that a black woman slave is also flesh and blood and not just a mere chattel with no human emotions.

The theme of dispossession is strongly embedded in the narrative of *Jubilee*. Walker’s narration shows that the notion of possession did not exist in the lives of the slaves as they were denied of any kind of ownership starting from their own body. In doing so they were dispossessed of their identity and subjectivity, and reduced to a dispossessed entity to be used and violated by their owners. Walker gives insights into the lives of these dispossessed entities, more specifically the female slaves. Lucy, Vryy’s older half-sister, is not spared the tyranny of Grimes, the overseer; her gender does not stop Grimes to resort to extreme measures to punish her and brand her with the letter “R” (runaway) on her face. Nonetheless, despite having undergone such inhuman torture, she eventually succeeded to escape to her freedom outbidding Grimes’ blood thirsty hounds and men who were sent behind her. Lucy becomes a symbol of the unwavering strength of black women and those female slaves who earned their freedom even after facing violent consequences of failed attempts.

Different shades of dispossession caused by slavery are present in Walker’s narrative. One of them is the slave mother who is being dispossessed of her own children. In a time when slaves were prohibited from claiming relationship with their family members, claiming rights over their own child became just a wishful thinking. In *Jubilee*. Sis Hetta dies at the age of 29 after giving birth to her fifteenth baby; ironically, she has claims on none of her children. Her marriage to Jake was just a nominal one. Her owner John Dutton has been sexually assaulting her repeatedly when “she was barely a pickaninny” (Walker 8). She being a present given by his father, he assumes his right to violate her in whatever ways he wanted to: “It was all his father’s fault. Anyway it was his father who taught him it was better for a young man of quality to learn life by breaking in a young nigger wench than it was for him to spoil a pure white virgin girl. And he had wanted Hetta, so his father gave her to him, and he had satisfied his lust with her” (Walker 8-9). Sis Hetta exemplifies how sexuality of black women was violated by their masters. These women were used as objects for sexual gratification and means of reproducing more slaves. Sis Hetta is pushed to her deathbed because of her frequent childbirths, yet she does not have a single child by her side to give her the love and comfort much needed at the parting hours. This is evident of how female slaves were reduced to mere breeders of slave children.

Another relative theme present in the novel is the theme of separation. The pain of dispossession of the slaves is accompanied by their pain of separation. Throughout the narrative the readers witness stories of forceful separation, specifically the stories of female slaves being separated from their mothers, children or husbands. Sadly, Vryy begins experiencing this separation from the time of her birth onwards; she is separated from her biological mother, separated from the one who took care of her as a mother and later on from her husband Randall Ware, a free African American. Though she tirelessly waits for her husband for a long period, the circumstances of the Reconstruction Era force her to marry Innis Brown. Another female slave of the Big House who is seen undergoing the pain of separation is Aunt Sally. She almost goes insane after her sons were sold off.

In contrary to slaves like Hetta and Sally, Walker includes the character of Caline in the novel. She is older than Hetta yet she has never bred any children and she has never regretted being a barren woman:

Caline had no children. She had never known why. Maybe it was something Old Marster made them do to her when she was a young girl and first started working in the Big House. Maybe it was the saltpeter. Anyway, Caline was glad. Slaves were better off, like herself, when they had no children to be sold away, to die, and to keep on having till they killed you, like Hetta was dying now. (Walker 4)

These stories of the female slaves clearly show the objectification of the female body: it becomes not just a site of violence and exploitation at the hands of the white owners but also a site of sexual abuse. Vryy, the mulatto protagonist is one of the results of the sexual assault of Hetta by her Marster John Dutton; being a slave's daughter she is destined to become a slave. Later she is put in the Big House as a personal slave of Miss Lillian, Vryy's half-sister and John Dutton's legitimate daughter. The mistress of the house leaves no chance to torment her because of her parentage. Vryy is a representation of many of those mulatto slaves who were never claimed by their fathers as their own flesh and blood but destined to become a slave of their father's household or plantation or being sold off to other plantation owners.

The figure of a strong black mother is a common presence in many of works of African American woman writers. Vryy, the protagonist of Margaret Walker also grows up to be a quintessence of such maternal strength. She does not run away leaving behind her two children despite Randall Ware's assurance of bringing them to her later. Instead, she dares to run away carrying both the children with her even after realising the greater risk of being caught with the children and bearing the heavy consequences of being caught in the act. Moreover, despite all the ill-treatments she has been receiving since her childhood in the Big House, she takes the selfless decision of sticking with her young mistress who has been totally devastated by the series of deaths in the family: her brother, husband and mother. In many ways, she proves to be wiser and more sensible than her second husband Innis Brown. It is Vryy who figures out the hidden motives of the white landlords. She persuades her husband to leave the house and go looking for a new one. Her unwavering courage is exhibited even at the times of adverse situation of the family; she does not give up instead she puts up a fight for the survival of her family during the Reconstruction period. She intelligently takes advantage of her fair skin and starts working as a mid-wife and even

succeeds in gaining confidence of the whites over the black folks thereby breaking down the racial prejudices to a great extent. Vyry realises the importance of education for her children unlike Innis Brown. She shows no reservation in dreaming about her children getting admission in a good school. Margaret Walker concludes her novel *Jubilee* with a hope for regeneration and reconstruction and a vision for an egalitarian society. Thus, at the heart of the novel is the assertion that Margaret Walker posits the possibility of surviving trauma and healing.

The final section of analysis focuses on the strong communal spirit of the slaves. A slave community is bound to be an unstable community as slaves were constantly bought and sold in the plantations. However, the novel shows that slaves tend to build quasi-familial connections among themselves, which become the undying source of moral strength and support for the slaves. This communal spirit of the slaves is depicted in the very opening of *Jubilee* where the slaves, mostly the woman folks gather to pray for Sis Hetta who is nearing her death. Their solidarity and unity may be attributed to two factors: a common African lineage and a common hellish experience of slavery. They had all been forcefully uprooted from their ancestral land and brought to the alien land of bondage. Their fleeting happiness and joy, and endless pain and sorrow find expression in the form of dance, songs and music called the “spirituals.”

[Spirituals] provide the most vivid documentation of slavery in the South... Spirituals are unique because they capture the individual as well as communal aspects of Southern slave culture and demonstrate authenticity, ingenuity, and creativity. Spirituals functioned as worship songs, songs of escape, songs that provide comfort, and songs that recorded the lives of slaves. The lyrical content of spirituals provides the most vivid and creative illustration of the ingenuity of slaves to resist their oppressors. (Price et al 882)

In the novel, Aunt Sally, though a person of few words, is seen articulating her suppressed emotions through songs. She uses songs to voice her protest against the sale of her sons. Big Missy fails to understand her rendition and sensing that she is going insane gets rid of her by selling her off just like her sons. However, this tradition of singing is passed on to young Vyry during her stay in the Big House. Just like Aunt Sally, Vyry is also found singing in many occasions when she has to endure the wrath of her masters. This shows how songs become an important part of their daily existence and how they are passed on across generations. Moreover, Walker adds a particular peritext the beginning of every chapter in the form of “a title and headnote, usually taken from a spiritual, a folksong, or a folk saying which corresponds to the increasingly jubilant mood of the plot” (Bell 287). The title of the novel *Jubilee* is also derived from a traditional Negro spiritual.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning again the innovations and subversions that are involved in the creation of *Jubilee*. The incorporation of songs and hymns of the slaves in the narrative contributes in validating *Jubilee* as a novel that preserves and reestablishes the rich oral tradition and folk culture of the African Americans. *Jubilee* challenges the traditional format of history writing at various levels: personal accounts of slavery get seamlessly merged with fiction; songs, hymns and spirituals form a part of the narrative technique; a

subaltern subject becomes the protagonist; and history gets reiterated through the experiences of the black female slaves. Thus, Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* effectively serves as an alternate history of slavery in the form of a neo-slave narrative that not only counters the hegemonic worldview of the white superiors but also forms a link between the past and present of the black community in America.

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