

# Exploring Identity, Power, And Reclamation In Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*: A Study

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## Abstract:

Margaret Walker's life and work exemplify her determination to establish her identity as a Black woman in a predominantly white, male-dominated society. As a novelist, Walker holds significant importance, crafting stories that delve into the complexities of racial experiences. Her work showcases the resilience and strength of individuals and communities as they navigate oppression, ultimately emerging victorious. *Jubilee* (1966) is a historical novel by Margaret Walker, based on her own family's history. The novel tells the story of Vyry Brown, a biracial slave woman, from her childhood on a Georgia plantation to her experiences during the American Civil War and Reconstruction. Through Vyry's journey, the novel explores themes of slavery, racism, family, identity, and resilience, offering a powerful and poignant portrayal of African American life during this tumultuous period in American history.

Key words: racism, slavery

Margaret Walker's writing transcends ideological boundaries, conveying the depth of human emotion and struggle. Despite portraying the brutal realities faced by Black people, Walker's overarching vision remains one of resistance, hope, and triumph. From the outset, her work *Jubilee* has highlighted the capacity of individuals and communities to push back against oppression and emerge stronger.

The novel *Jubilee* revolves around the life of Vyry, its central character, spanning three decades from 1839 to 1870. The story begins on a poignant note with the impending death of Vyry's mother, Sis Hetta, and concludes with the anticipation of a new life, as Vyry awaits the birth of her fourth child. The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of Vyry's complex family history, marked by her mother's long-term relationship with John Dutton, the master of Georgia Plantation, which began when Sis Hetta was just a teenager.

Following her mother's passing, Vyry is relocated to the Big House, where she struggles to avoid the wrath of Salina, the plantation mistress, who resentfully perceives Vyry as a constant reminder of her husband's infidelity. Despite her Christian faith, Salina shows no compassion towards Vyry, instead subjecting the young girl to relentless hard labor. Meanwhile, Ed Grimes, the overseer tasked with managing the slave labor, exploits and mistreats the enslaved individuals under his authority.

He describes Salina as,

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)\*

Salina's claim to being a devout Christian is questionable, but her ability to exert control over the slaves through fear and intimidation is undeniable. As long as she is in charge, the enslaved individuals on the plantation are subjected to coercion, whippings, and cruel punishments. Both Salina and Grimes, the overseer, inflict brutal treatment on the slaves. Grimes's racist views are evident in his dehumanizing remarks about black people, revealing his role as a ruthless executor of exploitation. Whenever cruelty is not being meted out, Salina fills the void, exemplifying a stark contrast between her professed Christianity and her cruel actions. When Vyry, as a child, forgets to empty the chamber pot, Salina retaliates by throwing the contents in her face. After the death of Vyry's surrogate mother, Mammy Sukey, the young

girl accidentally breaks one of Salina's China dishes, prompting Big Missy to hang her by her hands in a closet until she loses consciousness, only to be rescued by her father.

John Dutton intervenes to rescue Vvry from Salina's cruelty, motivated not by compassion but by the potential value Vvry will hold as a grown slave. Salina's resentment towards Vvry stems from her association with her husband's infidelity, and she vows to destroy Vvry and others like her. Despite her role as Vvry's stepmother, Salina rejects any maternal obligations towards her.

Vvry finds solace in the care of two surrogate mothers: Mammy Sukey, whose passing devastates her, and Aunt Sally, the Dutton's cook, who provides her with nourishment, warmth, and affection. However, the Duttons secretly decide to sell Aunt Sally, leaving Vvry traumatized and desperate to accompany her.

As Vvry transitions into womanhood, she assumes Aunt Sally's role as cook in the Big House. Her perception of freedom evolves when she meets Randall Ware, a free black man who promises to buy her freedom if she marries him. Vvry accepts his proposal, and they have two children together. However, Ware departs before the war, promising to return for Vvry.

The novel's narrative unfolds in three sections. The first part explores the antebellum period, marked by Salina's cruelty. The second section delves into the Civil War era, highlighting the decline of the Dutton family. Despite John Dutton's passing, Vvry remains enslaved, and Salina's dying wish is to never witness the freedom and equality of black people.

As the war unfolds, Salina suffers the loss of her husband, son, and son-in-law. Despite her grief, particularly over the death of her son Johnny, she remains steadfast in her support for the Confederacy until its downfall. Salina's life comes to an abrupt end when she succumbs to a stroke, thus fulfilling her desire to never witness the emancipation of slaves.

In the aftermath of Salina's passing, Vvry assumes a caretaking role, tending to her half-sister Lillian and her children. Following Lillian's husband's death in the war, she becomes increasingly dependent on Vvry, begging her not to abandon her on the plantation. As the war concludes, Lillian's mental state deteriorates, and Vvry takes on more responsibilities, effectively managing the plantation.

It isn't until 1865, when Vvry is twenty-eight, that the news of emancipation finally reaches rural Southern Georgia. Despite her newfound freedom, Vvry chooses to remain on the Dutton plantation, honoring her promise to Randall Ware to await his return and driven by compassion for Lillian. Vvry's devotion to those in need is exemplified by her selfless care for Lillian, who, after being attacked by Yankee soldiers, becomes permanently incapacitated. As Lillian's condition worsens, Vvry relocates to the Big House, assuming a maternal role and providing nurturing support, a stark contrast to Salina's selfishness.

A transformative encounter between Vvry and a young white woman, Betty-Alice Fletcher, marks a turning point in the narrative. When Vvry assists Betty-Alice during a difficult childbirth, their shared experience momentarily transcends the entrenched racism that has long plagued the Browns. Vvry's selfless act as a midwife not only saves the lives of mother and child but also earns her a sense of dignity and purpose.

When Innis reprimands Vvry for missing church, she articulates her personal philosophy, emphasizing her commitment to helping those in need, regardless of their background. This conviction is soon put to the test when Vvry, assumed to be white by the Fletchers, is exposed to their racist views. Betty-Alice perpetuates harmful stereotypes, claiming that black men are inherently predatory and physically aberrant.

Unable to bear these falsehoods, Vvry reveals her true racial identity and passionately denounces the myths that have been used to dehumanize her family and community. In a poignant outpouring of emotion, Vvry appeals to the Fletchers and Betty-Alice's parents to acknowledge her humanity and that of

her loved ones, forging a connection with them through their shared experience of birth and regeneration.

The bond between Vvry and the two white women, forged through their shared experience of childbirth, facilitates a profound and meaningful inter-racial connection. The narrative takes a surprising turn when Randall Ware, presumed dead, returns to take their son for schooling. Vvry's interaction with Ware reveals her growth and self-awareness, as she challenges his cynical views on race relations and criticizes his hatred towards whites.

Vvry's response to Ware's nihilism underscores her conviction that human interconnectedness transcends racial divisions. She also confronts Ware's dismissive attitude towards her sister Lillian, showcasing her own empathy and compassion. Through her words and actions, Vvry emerges as a symbol of spiritual resilience and forgiveness.

In a poignant reflection, Vvry recalls her traumatic experiences under the oppressive regime of "Big Missy" Salina, yet chooses to forgive this embodiment of white cruelty. This act of forgiveness is not a passive surrender but a powerful assertion of her black identity and humanity.

Ultimately, Vvry's journey concludes on a note of hope and reconciliation. As she anticipates the birth of her fourth child, Vvry remains committed to her life with Innis Brown, prioritizing family and community over the possibility of reuniting with Randall Ware. Through her selflessness and compassion, Vvry bridges the divide between white and black interests, embodying a profound sense of humanity and connection.

Vvry emerges as an iconic representation of the black woman, whose resilience and survival are rooted in her Christian faith, humanism, courage, resourcefulness, and musical heritage. However, by confining Vvry's activism to the domestic and familial spheres, Walker's narrative inadvertently celebrates a nostalgic portrayal of the black woman of the past, rather than envisioning a more empowered future.

In recreating her grandmother's story through Vvry's character, Walker, writing during the 1960s civil rights movement, seems to propose black humanism as a solution to America's racial tensions. *Jubilee* marks the culmination of over a century of American literary exploration of the complexities of the South and its women, both fictional and real, black and white.

Simultaneously, the novel celebrates the transformative power of black humanism, blending history and fiction into a rich narrative. Vvry embodies the collective experience of her people, whose struggles, tragedies, and triumphs have shaped the spiritual essence of the African American community. She becomes the triumphant heroine of this narrative, not merely due to her endurance of racial hardships, but because she exemplifies the racial will toward healing, unity, and resilience.

#### Reference:

- Walker, Margaret. *Jubilee* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 1966.