

## ALIENATION AND FRUSTRATION IN MARGARET WALKER'S *JUBILEE*

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### Abstract

Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* speaks of the true experiences of her maternal grandmother during American civil war period. It is the finest work of art representing both the contemporary elements and the past. It shows Walker's deep involvement in Civil Rights Movement and is an exemplary portrayal of her feminist consciousness. The novel substantiates the alienated state of African Americans in the racism dominated American society. Their feeling was alienation combined with frustration over failure of the governments to sanction their rights. *Jubilee* is a bildungsroman that narrates the struggling journey of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood. Walker revives the concerns over slavery and *Jubilee* is a ground-breaking novel of its time.

**Keywords:** Neo-slave Narration, Alienation, Feminism, Slavery, Civil war

### Introduction

*Jubilee* is the well-known neo-narration of Margaret Walker Alexander. Her poem "For My People" also fetched her much popularity. She was born Margaret Abigail Walker on July 7, 1915, in Birmingham, Alabama. She was a friend of the famous, Richard Wright. The two worked together on several of Wright's texts. In 1988, she published *Richard Wright, Daemonic Genius: A Portrait of the Man, a Critical Look at His Work*. She was awarded the Yale Award for Young Poets for "For My People." After that, she published *Jubilee*, the life story of a slave daughter (Donna Allego). She founded the Institute for the Study of the History, Life and Culture of Black People in 1968. Ms Walker then worked on *For Farish Street Green*, (1986) and *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (1989). Among Ms. Walker's awards are the Rosenwald Fellowship (1944), a Senior Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities (1972), and the White House Award for Distinguished Senior Citizen. She died in Chicago of cancer on November 30, 1998 when she was 83 years old.

### The Trendsetter

Margaret Walker's novel *Jubilee*, published in 1966, is one of the first novels to present the nineteenth-century African American historical experience in the South from a black and female point of view. The slavery system lasting for more than three centuries created a cleavage in American society. There was society functioning within a society. African American people felt themselves separated from the main stream. Franklin and Moss opine:

It was the system of slavery with its basic assumption of inherent inferiority of blacks that gave rise to the deliberate separation of the races ... the policy of forcing them in ghettos in larger cities had the effect of creating new forces for perpetuation of the black world. (423)

This alienation is skilfully represented in *Jubilee*. *The New York Times* praises *Jubilee* that it “chronicles the triumph of a free spirit over many kinds of bondage”. The ‘His’ story narrated before were only from the White and Male perspective. Here, Margaret comes up with a ‘Her’ story in which she claims her past and feels one with the land of her ancestors. The protagonist, Vyry, echoes her creator’s introspection and thoughts in every walk of the story. She ascends from a slave to a protector of her master’s family. The entire narration is based on Vyry’s experiences in the Dutton plantation, where most of the story is set.

### Introspection as Key Element

The winner of Houghton Mifflin's Literary Fellowship Award, the novel is a fictionalized account of the life of Walker's great-grandmother, Margaret Duggans Ware Brown. She was born a slave in Dawson in Terrell County and lived through Reconstruction in southwest Georgia. It is based on stories told to Walker by her maternal grandmother. Walker says:

I wanted to tell the story that my grandmother had told me, and to set the record straight where Black people are concerned in terms of the Civil War, of Slavery, segregation and in Reconstruction. I believe that the role of the novelist can be, and largely is for me, the role of a historian. More people will read fiction than will history, and history is slanted just as fiction may seem to be. People will learn about a time and a place through a historical novel. (Conversations 23)

The epic novel of the Civil War tells the story of Vyry, the daughter of a white plantation owner in Dutton and his beloved black mistress. Vyry was conceived, born and reared to womanhood among the slaves. Yet, the slavery did not curb her individuality and her spirit of freedom. Impeccably researched and beautifully written, *Jubilee* also tells a story of the Antebellum South, the Civil War, and Reconstruction from the black perspective.

### The Joy of Freedom

Walker's narrative is divided equally into three sections: the antebellum era, the Civil War (1861-65), and Reconstruction. Each section contains eighteen to twenty-two chapters. Despite the lengthy narrative passages and the demands on the reader imposed by the various dialects, *Jubilee* moves its heroine, Vyry, from the slave cabin to the "Big House," and from slavery to freedom. The chapters include many harrowing scenes from Vyry's childhood, such as the "Fourth of July Celebration" where slaves from Vyry's plantation are forced to watch a public hanging of two slave women.

### The Inherent Role of Civil War

*Jubilee* draws on both history and folk traditions of the South America and how they are affected by the Civil War. The treatment of the slaves is based on numerous slave narratives Walker researched in archives and libraries in Georgia, North Carolina, and the National Archives. Amy Levin observes that “Black women writers turn repeatedly to writing about slavery because the topic allows them to focus on themes of power, identity, family, and authenticity” (284). The Civil War section of *Jubilee* traces the battles, historically, from

Tennessee to Sherman's march through Georgia. The African American male characters Randall Ware and Brother Zeke, who are both literate, function in dual roles as spies for the Union army and foot soldiers in the Confederate army.

### **The Protector**

As the Union soldiers storm and destroy the plantations, including the Dutton place, Vry's role changes from that of chattel slave to primary protector of the property and caretaker of her master's daughter and two grandchildren. The book's final section begins with the war's end. It does not bring immediate freedom for Vry. In addition to her caretaking duties, she, along with a "contraband" freedman named Innis Brown, must work the crops. She anxiously awaits word from Randall Ware, her husband. When she receives news that Ware is dead, her heart will not allow her to believe it. Innis Brown, however, expresses interest in Vry; befriends her children, Minna and Jim; and asks Vry to marry him. Innis Brown's hard work and his dream of owning a home and farm persuade her to do so. They leave the Dutton plantation and move to Alabama. After several temporary homes, including one burned by the Ku Klux Klan, Vry and her family settle in Greenville, Alabama. The building of the new house is a community effort. Vry's midwifery and the marketing of her vegetables establish a bond between blacks and whites in the community. The house-building celebration concludes with quilting bees, plenty of food, and the solidarity of the "neighborhood watch" (Carmichael 272)

### **Reconstruction**

With a home and a farm in place, Randall Ware, who survived the Civil War after all, fulfills Vry's dream of schooling for her children. After seven years of military duty, work in his smithy and grist mill in Dawson, and service as a charter member of the Georgia Equal Rights Association, Ware traces Vry and her family to Greenville. He knows of her marriage to Innis Brown, but his mission is to take his son, Jim, to a training school in Selma, Alabama. The final section of *Jubilee* thus shifts its focus to the education of blacks during and after Reconstruction (Carmichael 273). The conclusion indicates a link between the incidents that occurred during Reconstruction and the civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The story concludes with a train moving to Selma. Once Jim and his father board the train, they are instructed to take their seats in segregated order- front seats for coloured and rear seats for whites.

### **Conclusion**

This civil war novel with a true story has presented a unique heroine who is comparable with O'Hara of *Gone with the Wind*. Anyone who is fed up with documentary civil war books can try *Jubilee* and live the war moments. It is a magnificent true story narrated with subtle knowledge and feelings. Vry is a sort of a character who has a long lasting effect and always dwells in the readers' mind.

**Workcited**

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Dr.V.Sekhar is currently working as the Associate Professor of English in the prestigious National College, Trichy. The college is a highly reputed institution in Tamil Nadu and is nearing its centenary year. The author is known for his professional excellence and keen interest in research. He is the supervisor of many doctoral scholars and is known for his intellectual depth. He is interested in expanding his knowledge base in diverse discipline. He inspires many young scholars.