



## REARTICULATING SLAVE WOMEN'S HISTORY: BLACK FEMINISM IN MARGARET WALKER'S *JUBILEE*

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### ABSTRACT

Black feminism argues that western feminism only takes the white, middle-class women into consideration. It works in both the theoretical and activist ways to empower black women against the intersectionality of racism, sexism, gender and class oppression. It plays an active role in demystifying the various negative controlling images perpetrated against black women since slavery. The prominent images are mammy, matriarch, jezebel, sapphire and breeder woman. The paper is an attempt to analyse Margaret Walker's neo-slave narrative *Jubilee* as presented from the perspective of slave women. It argues how the slave women resist the controlling images and lead an artistic life with values of humanism.

**Keywords**-Black feminism, slavery, controlling images.

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Black feminism is a theoretical and activist stance against the intersectionality of racism, sexism, gender and class oppression. It aspires to oppose multiple oppressions and works for the empowerment of black women by fighting against social injustice. Black feminism criticizes Western feminism for being racist and privileging only the white, middle-class women. Black women have been suffering inhuman atrocities since slavery. Black women writers such as Margaret Walker (1915-1998) have taken up the theme of slavery in the neo-slave narrative, *Jubilee* (1966). Bernard Bell had coined the term "neo-slave narrative" in his book *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987). Bell argued that these novels are "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (289). He had designated *Jubilee* as the first neo-slave narrative. The paper will attempt to

address the ideologies and negative controlling images perpetrated against slave women. It will show how Walker had managed to rearticulate black female history from the perspective of black women.

Black feminism argues that there are major differences in the ideologies perpetrated against white women and black women. While white women are believed to be virtuous, innocent, pure, chaste and goddess-like, black women are believed to be inherently promiscuous, lascivious and a sexual object. According to bell hooks, slave women were termed as "sexual temptress", "sexual savage" and "sexual heathens" (33). In reality, they were sexually vulnerable from their adolescent years and suffered harsh punishment if they did not submit to the demands of the white men. While white women are treated as fragile and incapable of doing heavy

work, black women are treated as mules which can be exploited to perform heavy labour. The grandmother Nanny in Zora Neale Hurston's (1891-1960) novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) says to the young Janie Crawford that "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (17). Their work performed as dehumanized mules is described by Patricia Hill Collins as "economically exploitative, physically demanding and intellectually deadening" (48). In the working sector, black men were not made to do womanly tasks whereas black females were made to work in the fields, perform household chores, become an animalistic breeder and suffer sexual assaults from white men. According to Angela Y. Davis,

"Expediency governed the slaveholders' posture toward female slaves: when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles." (10)

Slave women's sexuality and fertility was exploited for breeding slaves in order to make profit in the slave market. They were simply breeders and not mothers as the slave children were frequently sold in early childhood. According to Collins, the average life expectancy of slave women was only 33.6 years (51). Many slave women died during childbirth. After Emancipation, when black women migrated to the urbanized North, the main occupation of black women was domestic work which exposed them to continuous sexual harassment. Those who entered the factories were offered the dirtiest work as labourers, sweepers, and ragpickers. On the mental and psychological level, the black women continued to be devalued as the fallen woman, the image having penetrated into the American psyche. They persistently faced devaluation as it was the white man's strategy to control the rising self-confidence of black women, many of whom had left their work in fields and aspired to be like white women.

There are numerous stereotypical and derogatory images of black women which tend to their commodification and degeneration. Both black men and women suffered tremendously from

institutionalized racism but as Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897) mentions in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861),

"Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own." (294)

During the journey through the Middle Passage, the African female slaves were stripped and beaten. bell hooks says that,

"The nakedness of the African female served as a constant reminder of her sexual vulnerability. Rape was a common method of torture slavers used to subdue recalcitrant black women. The threat of rape or other physical brutalization inspired terror in the psyches of displaced African females." (18)

The female slaves were tortured differently so as to tame them into the passive cook, house-servant, wet nurse who can never dare to poison the family, set fire to the house or kill white children.

The first controlling image is the Mammy. Mammy is an obedient and faithful domestic servant. She is meant to love, care and nurture the white children of her master's household more than her own children. The image of the Mammy is used as a yardstick to justify the behaviour of black women and to confine them in servile domestic duties. Mammies are imagined to be happy and contented but they are just silent in their subordinate roles. According to Barbara Christian,

"Mammy is black in color, fat, nurturing, religious, kind, above all strong, and as Faulkner would call Dilsey, enduring. She relates to the world as an all embracing figure, and she herself needs or demands little, her identity derived mainly from a nurturing service. She must be plump and have big breasts and arms—she is the mammy in the unconscious of the South, desired and needed since ideal white women would have to debase themselves in order to be a mother. In contrast, the white woman was supposed to be frail, alabaster white, incapable of doing hard

work, shimmering with the beauty of fragile crystal. These images are dependent on one another, since the white woman could not be ornamental, descriptive, fussy, if she nursed and brought up children." (2)

Since the mammy is deemed to be asexual and a surrogate mother, she is not considered to possess the sexual roles of other slave women. The mammy is also expected to teach deferential behaviour to her children, to obey the white masters, and so is helpful for the propagation of racism.

The second controlling image is that of the black matriarch. It is based on a notorious government report "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" by Daniel Moynihan et al in 1965. The report emerged at a time when Black activism and Women's Rights movement was at its height. It categorically proclaimed that most Black women who looked after their families are unfeminine, aggressive and assertive. These women do not perform their traditional womanly and motherly roles, which is a cause of concern, since it is the reason for the failure of children as well as depriving their husbands of their manhood. The black matriarch image is the failure of the submissive, loving and docile mammy. It also points at the false assumption of the absence of the black patriarchy. The Moynihan report seems to be a calculated step on the part of white racists to create an effective barrier between black women and black man, as well as black women and white women at the most critical juncture of their movements for emancipation. However, the Matriarchy thesis is wrong. Although black women played dual roles of mothers as well as were economically productive, they were in no position to dominate or rule the family. Both black men and women were deprived of having a stable family as family members were sold at the whims and fancies of the slaveholders. The torturous life of the slaves prevented them from having any matriarchal status.

The third controlling image is the jezebel which means sexually-aggressive, libidinous and promiscuous black women. The stereotype had been created since slavery to justify the incessant sexual assaults of white men towards black women. It justified the black women as inherently immoral

and absolved the white man from any moral responsibility. According to Sally Robinson,

"In creating the Jezebel image, masters submitted the black female slave to the exigencies of a foregone conclusion; if the black woman was "naturally" lascivious and promiscuous, then her behaviour could be understood within the interpretive frame established to mask her humanity, and to inscribe her difference from the hegemonic group—in this case, the white woman." (140)

The myth of the black male rapist was also deliberately created to justify the false accusation that only black men could rape white women, as if white men raping black women was the natural consequence of black woman's loose morality and sensuous animality.

The fourth controlling image is Breeder woman. This image was created during slavery when the law proclaimed that children born of slave mothers will automatically be slaves irrespective of the father being a white or black man. This method was socially sanctioned as every slave born is a valuable unit of property. The female slave children were more valuable as they could be further exploited to breed more slaves. During slavery, advertisements for sale at auction blocks described black women as 'slaves in breeding period', 'child-bearing slaves' and 'too old to breed'. While mulattoes were in great demand, barren women were difficult to sell and suffered more torture than other women.

The fifth controlling image is Sapphire. The image of the Sapphire or Bad Black woman is the opposite of the image of mammy. It is a depiction of black women as evil, bitchy, stubborn, hateful, demonic and treacherous. The image has been created basing on the image of Eve as inherently sinful and evil in Christian mythology.

Black women's literature typifies emergent women who become successful in achieving a self-definition of their own. It expresses the contradictions between the everyday experiences lived by black women and images projected by the controlling images. Black women's writing is one of the "safe spaces" apart from black sisterhood and

blues, where they can explore black women's femininity in their own unique ways without being manipulated by the dominant ideologies.

Patricia Hill Collins speaks of an African American women's intellectual tradition which had been largely obscured in history. According to Collins,

"This dialectic of oppression and activism, the tension between the suppression of African-American women's ideas and our intellectual activism in the face of that suppression, constitutes the politics of U.S. Black feminist thought." (3)

There are two categories of interrelated knowledge that forms the core of black feminist thought. The first is the commonplace everyday knowledge shared informally by black women about their daily life. This constitutes knowledge such as how to deal with white people, what are the characteristics of good men, how to style hair, how to make quilts etc. Alice Walker in her essay, "In Search of our Mothers' Gardens" said that black mothers and grandmothers were deeply spiritual saints who possessed immense creative talent. They were artists who expressed their talents in quilting, herbal science, gardening and story-telling. The second is the specialized knowledge created by intellectuals whose theories form the standpoint of black women. Their first-hand experience as African American women allows them to have a greater critical insight into oppression. Barbara Smith in the essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" says "The way, for example, that Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Margaret Walker, Alice Walker incorporate the traditional black female activities of rootworking, herbal medicine, conjure and midwifery into the fabric of their stories is not mere coincidence, nor is their use of specifically black female language to express their own and their character's thoughts accidental" (417). As an example, Walker's historical fiction *Jubilee* emphasizes on cooking, herbal medicine and midwifery as activities which give black women an identity.

The novel, *Jubilee* encompasses the historical periods of the Ante-Bellum years, the Civil War years and Reconstruction and Reaction. It is the story of the author's own maternal great-

grandmother, Margaret Duggans Ware Brown and maternal great-grandfather Randall Ware, whose story had been narrated to Margaret Walker by her maternal grandmother, Elvira Ware Dozier. The novel upholds the tradition of oral narration in the true black female spirit of storytelling. The fifty-eight chapters open with a folk song as an epigraph. The songs are spirituals, hymns, minstrel songs and work songs. The use of epigraphs from black folk culture defies the popular tradition of quoting epigraphs from canonical works of male white authors. Even the titles of the chapters are taken from folk sayings, many of them being exact repetition of the words spoken by Walker's grandmother. The novel also uses Georgian slave dialect, folk proverbs and maxims as a way to reclaim the oral tradition.

The works of Margaret Walker is based on the humanistic tradition. In *How I Wrote Jubilee and other essays on Life and Literature*, she defines the humanistic tradition as "a recognition that we are part of nature and the historical process, that we are implicit in the dynamic evolving of mankind to ever higher planes of being, that all life must be richly developed in spirit rather than mere matter, and that one must regard the sacred nature of a brother or sister as one values his own privacy and inner sanctity" (128). Walker's humanistic tradition is based on inclusiveness and spiritual upliftment which can overcome racism and respect human dignity.

In the novel, Vvry had been an unloved slave child born as a result of miscegenation between a white master and a black slave woman. It was her nemesis that she looked like a twin-sister to Miss Lillian, the daughter of Mistress Salina and Marster John. The outstanding similarities in features and upbringing between Vvry and Miss Lillian often led people to misunderstand that they were slave and mistress, thus reminding Salina Dutton of her husband's sexual exploits with slave women. Vvry's looks was a clear indication of race as a social and ideological construct which believed that any white-complexioned person with a fraction of black blood will be considered black. Vvry's fate had been sealed as "Lillian's nigger maid" (21) by Salina Dutton who took this decision to torture the innocent child. However, Vvry had developed a bond

of implicit sisterhood with Miss Lillian. The final catastrophe of the Dutton plantation was the dishonouring of Miss Lillian which resulted in her lifelong insanity. It is her sympathetic half-sister Vvry who promised not to abandon her in her greatest distress.

Initially, Vvry grew into a resigned child because she was taught not to ask too many questions and to please the Marster's family with the best manners. Although she witnessed the tremendous tortures of slavery from a young age, Vvry had a deep understanding of the suffering around her. She not only understood the misery of the slaves but also the hunger and suffering of the "poor whites, po buckra" (59). The pathetic condition of the poor whites suggest that all the white people were not equally powerful in their domination over blacks and they were even dependent on black women for basic needs such as food. Later in the novel, while searching for her second home, Vvry instantaneously cooks and feeds a poor white family as she could not bear to look at the five thin, ragged and hungry children.

The novel portrays the gradual development of Vvry from an indecisive and resigned person to a proactive and successful woman. Despite her suffering, Vvry's personal doctrine preaches forgiveness and a humanitarian approach for both blacks and whites alike. After losing three self-built homes due to floods, the menace of sharecropping and violence of the Ku Klux Klan, Vvry had adopted a powerful way to know the community before building her home again. Although Vvry felt immensely disturbed after knowing about the hostility towards mixed schools, the Ku Klux Klan and the "nigger-war" (423), she readily ran to help a white woman during childbirth. Vvry's new status as a granny or midwife in the white settlement not only won her appreciation but the white solidarity to give her family a permanent place in the white settlement. Vvry's active mind and selfless attitude led a white woman, Betty-Alice's mother to shower the praise that, "the best grannies in the world is colored grannies. They doesn't never lose they babies and they hardly loses they mothers. They is worth more'n money" (432). It is the ultimate praise for people like Granny Ticey

who had sacrificed their lives for the survival of others. Vvry's husband Innis Brown had seen her immense struggle to single-handedly give birth to children and bring them up with utmost courage and endurance. He aptly praises her spirituality and motherhood in these words,

"But Innis Brown knew that she was touched with a spiritual fire and permeated with a spiritual wholeness that had been forged in a crucible of suffering...In her obvious capacity for love, redemptive and forgiving love, she was alive and standing on the highest peaks of her time and human personality. Peasant and slave, unlettered and untutored, she was nevertheless the best true example of the motherhood of her race, an ever present assurance that nothing could destroy a people whose sons had come from her loins." (486)

The words can be considered as a black man's tribute to a black woman. It defies the stereotypes of black motherhood as it suggests that even if Vvry was an illiterate slave, she developed values which can be understood as universally appealing to all humanity.

Vvry, the mother had learnt a lot from her othermothers (black women who assist in bringing up the children of other black women). Vvry's othermother Mammy Sukey had taught her good manners and to act like a lady as she was not supposed to be a field hand or yard nigger. As Mammy Sukey says, "You is gone wait on Quality and you got to act like Quality" (19). However, she knew that Vvry's good manners will not soften Missy Salina's heart. As she says, "Politeness and cleanness and sweet ways ain't make no difference nohow. She gone stomp her and tromp her and beat her and mighty nigh kill her anyhow" (20). It shows that Mammy Sukey had an intuitive mind who knew how to win self-respect in society. After Mammy Sukey's death, it is Aunt Sally who becomes her othermother. Apart from being a clandestine revolutionary, Aunt Sally's rich and dark singing voice remained a source of solace for Vvry even after she is sold. At the time of hopelessness over thoughts of freedom for Vvry's children, it is the gift

of Aunt Sally's songs which unburdened her. As it is said, "Nevertheless she began to unburden herself as Aunt Sally had by lifting her voice in song. She was surprised to hear the dark rich voice of Aunt Sally come out of her throat. She was surprised to discover how much she enjoyed singing and what a relief she felt when she sang. The days always went faster singing" (151). Aunt Sally was the maternal figure who taught her survival skills such as how to deal with Big Missy and how to steal food as slaves were always underfed. She also taught her to be cautious when she attained her womanhood. Before Vyry, Aunt Sally had earned the reputation "of being one of the best cooks in Lee County and even in the state of Georgia" (41). Vyry also learnt the art of cooking and herbal medicine from Aunt Sally which gave her a distinctive identity not only as a chief cook during antebellum years but it is through cooking, feeding and caring that she could change the heart of the white people from hatred and hostility to mutual love and solidarity. The images of Mammy Sukey and Aunt Sally suggest the subversion of the image of mammy.

Apart from mammy, the novel represents several controlling images of black women. Vyry's mother, Sis Hetta is the prominent example of the breeder woman and Caline is the example of barren woman. Sis Hetta was "a right young woman" (4), only "twenty-nine years old" (5) who died young as she could breed younguns faster than other woman. As it is said during her fifteenth and last childbirth, "It wasn't the first time this heavy breeding woman, whose babies came too fast, tearing her flesh in shreds, had had a hard and complicated time" (6). On the other hand, Caline was a middle-aged woman who was glad with her situation as she felt that "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" (4). While barren women were deemed to be a waste of chattel property, Caline felt extremely satisfied with her situation. It shows that while slave-holders were valorising breeding women, here Caline was valorising her barren self.

Hetta had been victimised as a sex object by John Morris Dutton to fulfill his youthful lust. She had been a gift from the father to son on the pretext

that "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" (9). It exposes the innate biasness and contrasting ideology of the white man between black women and white women. Moreover, the young Hetta had been viewed as an exotic being, a tempess, "she looked like some African queen from the Congo" (8). The young Marster thought that she imagined herself, "in an African jungle among palms and waterfalls with gold rings coiled around her neck" (8). This kind of exoticism is in direct contrast to the reality of black women's lives. She had no control over her body. Initially, she fought back but was pressurized to yield to the Marster's demands. As it is mentioned, "He still remembered her tears, and her frightened eyes, and how she had pleaded to be left alone, but he had persisted until she had given in to him" (9). Hetta lived her life crying after Marster's visits and grieving over her helpless condition when her children were sold.

The predicament of the black woman is in stark contrast to the white woman. Although the young Marster had slave children with Hetta, he married only "a beautiful young lady of quality from a fine old family" (9). The white woman inherently got the status of being a lady of quality. Salina's sexual demeanour was highly restricted and she possessed absolute control over her body. Her behaviour led to immense frustration on the part of the young Marster as "she was pious and romantic and she locked her door most nights against him" (10). The notion of breeding did not exist for the white woman. After having two children, she simply refused to procreate any further. As it is said,

"Salina made him understand that sex, to her mind, was only a necessary evil for the sake of procreation. When she had presented him with a son and a daughter, she further informed him that her duty as a wife had ended. She simply would not, no, she simply could not go through all that suffering again. She did not want any more children, and consequently there was no more need for sex." (10)

Salina's outrage on finding her husband's relationship with Hetta failed to have any impact as

"Miscegenation was no sin to Marse John. It was an accepted fact of his world" (10). The novel, however, portrays the slave women in a positive light as after Hetta's death in the beginning of the novel, no other slave woman in the Dutton plantation is shown to be breeding by white slaveholders.

The episode of the arrest of the two slave cooks for poisoning three persons in their master's families deserves special mention as it portrays the extreme vulnerability of slave women. Their punishment by public hanging on the Fourth of July was deliberately manipulated so as to "make an example of them and put the fear of God in the rest of the slaves" (82), but in reality, it was poisonous mushrooms which had killed their master's family. Even Aunt Sally was sold as a preventive measure because according to Missy Salina, "she's really getting too temperamental" (80), and may poison her family. The episode is a direct attack to Vvry as she is also the cook of a plantation. Vvry was an illiterate slave cook but the knowledge she possessed about medicinal plants and its cure of various ailments can supersede that of many contemporary man or woman. As Ed Grimes and the patten-rollers questioned her why she was collecting weeds, Vvry displayed her magnificent knowledge about the medicinal plants and their cure. The expressionless faces of her listeners reflected their ignorance and they were only concerned to know whether Vvry was collecting "pizen" and "weeds" (101) to kill her master's family. Vvry's apt reply demonstrated her innate goodness, "Nossah, I ain't fooling with no pizen. Course I can't tell what's pizen from what ain't pizen. I just knows the good roots. I ain't never knowed the bad roots" (101). Vvry's knowledge defies the ideology that black women are Sapphires or inherently evil creatures who can go to any extent to destroy their masters.

Vvry's leadership emerged after the death of the Dutton family. Miss Lillian, who remained displayed no strength of leadership as she was too depressed with the death of her family members. Vvry persuaded the remaining women that they should plant a crop at their own initiative. In this case, her foremost priority had been the survival of both her and Miss Lillian's children. Vvry's forte was her culinary skills which she had acquired from Aunt

Sally and it is by her instinctive cooking and feeding that she begins to win hearts after Freedom. Vvry emerged as a strong and determined character in her family's severe crisis of making a home and recurring displacement. It was Vvry who broke the children's fever after their first home was flooded. It was on Vvry's advice that Innis Brown stopped arguing and abandons the house of the white man who tried to take advantage of Innis Brown's illiteracy and exploit them by debts caused by sharecropping. After the destruction of their third home by Ku Klux Klan, Vvry repeatedly refused to give permission to Innis Brown to construct their fourth home. It was only on account of Vvry's altruistic gestures that she made the impossible happen-the white community building a house for a black family, not only with their own hands but mutual trust and goodwill. It can be interpreted that Vvry was the decision-maker in the family. She became a working woman in the fields who decided which crops or vegetables will yield more profit. She sold eggs to fund her children's education since Innis Brown thought education was a waste of money. However, Vvry was not a matriarch as she thought of Innis Brown as a mutual partner, who had even assisted Vvry in giving birth to their first child, Harry, "under the calm, controlled, and steady direction of Vvry" (355). It was Vvry who took the toughest decision of her life to choose Innis Brown over Randall Ware as her husband because Innis Brown had looked after her family through thick and thin when Randall Ware was engaged in his political pursuits. Vvry also manages to teach her doctrine of forgiveness and reconciliation to Randall Ware, her family and her community.

Thus, Vvry is the epitome of Walker's humanistic tradition as she dissolves hatred and unifies the two races. The other slave women also subvert the dominant images and demonstrate resistance against the peculiar institution of slavery by being the able artists in their everyday life. The novel is the outcome of Walker's meticulous research of historical documents from 1934 to 1966 to substantiate her grandmother's tale. It is the intellectual effort of a novelist who also believes to play the role of a historian. Thus, the novel uses

specialized knowledge to rearticulate the everyday experiences of slave women.

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