Black Slaves’ Plight Reconstructed: A Study of Margaret Walker’s Jubilee

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Abstract: This article deals with black slaves’ plight in the United States during slavery in Margaret Walker’s Jubilee. It purports to demonstrate that apart from the ironical kindness of some white masters who have mercy on their slaves, there are many dramatic events which attest not only of the contrast and the white masters’ wrong view over black slaves, but also of the latter’s nothingness in a world ruled by Whites. The author’s reconstruction of the black slaves’ plight evidences the historical dimension of her novel.

Key Words: Plight, Black slaves, Masters, Slavery, History, Fiction.

INTRODUCTION

I would like to start this exploration on Margaret Walker’s Jubilee by giving a brief explanation of the word ‘Plight’ which might seem somehow obscure to some readers. It is linked to black slaves’ all forms of victimization by their white masters in the United States during slavery. The novel is based on the life of its protagonist named Vyry who embodies the whole black community because of the different treatments inflicted on her by her white masters. My interest in this study is especially linked to what this novel owes to the black slaves’ lives and how much these lives may have influenced the author’s imagination. I want to point to a few aspects of this narrative that seem to me to constitute an intertextual relationship between the author’s imagination and reality. This intertextuality is to be seen in terms of the intertwining between fiction and history. Because the novel’s structure is built on the black slaves’ enslavement and nothingness, I will begin this discussion by examining the slaves’ relationship with their white masters by having a look at the image of some good masters and bad ones. Then, I will study the black slaves’ nothingness in a world ruled by Whites.

1. THE IMAGE OF GOOD MASTERS ON PLANTATIONS

In Walker’s Jubilee, the black slaves’ living conditions on plantations vary from one master to another for the simple reason that they do not have the same conception of slaves. While some recognize that black slaves are also human beings like them, and that they must be given a certain consideration, others take them for granted and give no respect or value to them. Regarding these two different types of masters, one may clearly say that there are some slaves who take a profit from their masters’ kindness. For example, Marse John is said to be a “nigger loving man” by Grimes, the overseer, because he buys shoes for his slaves as a reward for their hard work: “Marse John was pleased and gave Grimes money to buy shoes for all the hands” (p. 113). Marse John usually shows this kindness to his slaves particularly during Christmas time:

After a very good harvest Master might let them have a young shoat to barbecue, especially at Christmas time. Marse John was generous to a fault and always gave plenty of cheap rum and gallons of cheap whiskey to wash the special Christmas goodies down (pp. 115-116).

Marse John’s kindness to the slaves is also shown through the response he gives to Vyry’s request of leaving the plantation after her wedding with Randall Ware: “Who would take care of you, feed you and clothe you, and shelter you and protect you?” (p. 20). This interrogation shows that during slavery some slaves’ owners always treated their slaves like children who could not do anything without their help.

One may also notice that Marse John dislikes tortures; he is never around when there is a punishment to make and prefers “to leave the stern punishing of all his black labours in the hands of Grimes as long as he didn’t go too far, for Grimes
had a reputation of knowing how to handle nigras” (p. 29). This attitude indicates that Margaret Walker is conscious of the historical truth according to which there were not only rigid and merciless masters, but also good ones. The author continues to describe this attitude of good masters through the character of John Morris Dutton who blames his wife, Salina trying to kill Vyry:

> What you trying to do, Salina, kill her?
> Yes, I reckon that’s what’s. What I oughta do. Kill her and all other yellow bastards like her. Killing's too good for her’. ‘Well don’t you try it again, d’ye hear me? Don’t you dare try it again! She’s nothing but a child, but someday she’ll be grown-up and worth much as a slave. Then you’ll be sorry’ (p. 31).

In the historical sense, Vyry who is brutalized by her mistress aiming to kill her because of the fact that she is black and a daughter of her husband, embodies all black slave children who were ill-treated during slavery. But, John Morris Dutton’s reaction against his wife’s decision shows the image of good masters. This is to say that unlike some historians who often describe white masters as bad people to their slaves, Walker, however, keeps on recalling their positive side through John Morris Dutton who is asked by Salina to kill Vyry because of her resemblance with their daughter, Lillian. But, John Morris Dutton rejects this order when he argues:

> Don’t you dare threaten me, John Morris Dutton, Don’t you dare threaten me. So far as killing her, I ain’t even hurt her. I oughta kill her, but I ain’t got the strength to kill a tough nigra bastard like her (id.,).

Knowing that the first objective to have children with black women slaves is to have extra manpower on plantations, these children are not excluded to all forms of wrong treatments. But, the sentence “I ain’t got the strength to kill a tough nigra bastard like her” indicates that Dutton shows his love not only for Vyry as his slave daughter, but for all black slaves as human beings. This means that Dutton recognizes the state of humanity endowed in every human being as a creature of God.

John Morris Dutton’s rejection to kill Vyry and his love for every slave push his wife to consider him as a weak master, as the author writes: “Perhaps Salina was correct correct when she accused her husband of being a weak disciplinarian and not firm enough with his slaves” (p. 29). Walker’s depiction of some Whites as good masters towards black slaves does not derive from her own imagination, for like her, Gaines, in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman also contextualizes it through a white lady, promising Jane a good treatment if she accepts to go with her to Ohio: “Oh child, child, there ain’t no Ohio. If there is, it ain’t what you done made up in your mind. Y'all come back with me. Y’all come back. I’ll treat you right” (Gaines: 1971, 29).

Here, Jane’s hesitation to go to Ohio may be justified by the fact that she is afraid of going where her conditions of life as a slave will be worse than before. But, the white lady’s sweet words of love for every black slave convince her to go there: “I never beat my people, the white laday said. Some people don’t beat their niggers” (p. 28). On their way to Ohio, especially in Luzana, Jane claims for everything promised to her by Brown just before leaving her former master, and got the following answer from the white lady conducting her: “See that y’all have something to eat, clothes, school. Everything Brown promised you, you go’n have right here in Luzana” (Gaines, ibid., 33). Through facilities like “eating, clothes, and school”, the author shows some good white masters allowing their slaves to enjoy human and civil rights. These facilities also show the white masters’ recognition of black slaves as human beings, and attest of the author’s efforts in reconstructing the good attitude of some white masters during slavery. This recognition of black slaves as human beings is once more reconstructed by Walker in Jubilee when she paraphrases a white man telling slaves to escape as a way to freedom:

> ‘Well, will you do it? Do you really want to be free, or are you afraid?’ He was saying to Sam and Big Boy and Caline and May Liza that they were human beings with a right to freedom. ‘You are just as good as your masters and you will remain in bondage no longer than you are willing to fight and stop enduring all this inhuman treatment (p. 42).

This argument shows that during slavery some white people were against the way white masters were treating black slaves. For, this white man makes it clear that freedom is not a matter of race or the color of skin, but a right deserved by every creature of God. For this reason, he does not see why black slaves should remain in bondage. The author’s recognition of some white masters’ good attitude towards their slaves is grounded in the history of the United States. For, she retraces what really happened to slaves during slavery, as a former slave named Gus Smith recounts his own experience on a particular plantation:
My master let us come and go pretty much as we pleased. In fact we had much more freedom dan de most of de slave had in those days. He let us go to other places to work when we had nothing to do at home and we kept our money we earned, and spent it to suit ourselves. We had it so much better den other slaves dat our neighbors would not let their slaves associate with us, for fear we would put devilment in their heads, for we had too much freedom.

This testimony shows that during slavery, the slaves' masters could be divided into two categories: The first category is composed of masters who considered slaves as objects, and the last is the one that gives a slight respect to them. Here, it appears that despite Whites’ agreement on the way slaves could be treated, there were some white masters who considered slaves as human beings like themselves, and as such they would be treated with respect.

The experience of black people on the American soil which the writers relate cannot be limited to the description of the white masters’ paternalistic attitude. The reader can also sense how this need for historical truth draws the writer to the white masters’ bad attitude towards their slaves.

2. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE MASTERS’ BAD ATTITUDE TOWARDS SLAVES

One of Walker’s intentions in writing Jubilee is to display some aspects of violence inflicted on black slaves by their white masters who take them for granted. She for example indicates the rate at which they die daily because of their masters’ wrong view over them: “For five days there was a new grave everyday” (p. 26). The further illustration of this is to be found in the passage in which the author describes what Vyry has seen after receiving whippings from Grimes, the overseer: “Vyry saw stars that were red and black and silver and there were a thousand of those stars in the midnight sky” (p. 40). Walker continues to describe Vyry’s experience of suffering in these terms:

The third time she thought she heard a roaring noise like thunder rumbling and a forest of trees falling in a floor (...). Everything went black. She was caught up in the blackness of a storm (...). Every light went out the like a candle and she fainted (p. 144).

Vyry’s whipping by the overseer occurs at the moment she is caught up before reaching Randall Ware who wants to buy her freedom through a wedding with her, as he argues:

“Marry me. Marry me now. I promise you I’ll buy your freedom if it’s the last thing I do. It won’t be long, I’m sure, but I can’t wait. I want you for my woman now. ‘When you buy my freedom, then I marriage with you, and not before!’ (p. 83).

This passage shows not only Randall Ware’s desire to have Vyry as a wife, but also Vyry’s lack of freedom in a land ruled by Whites who have no mercy on Blacks. Vyry’s sufferings are also caused by Salina who is used to torturing her. For example when Vyry forgets to empty Lillian’s little china chamber, Salina throws the acrid contenty of the pot in her face instead of whipping her, as she avoids hurting herself by whipping her most of the time:

Trembling with fear of the whipping she knew she was going to get she stood before Big Missy, who was standing in the doorway of the kitchen and holding the pot of stale pee in her hand. Instead of whipping her, she threw the acrid contenty of the pot in Vyry’s face and said, ‘there, you lazy nigger, that’ll teach you to keep your mind on what you’re doing. Don’t you let me have to tell you another time about this pot or I’ll half-kill you, do you hear me?’ ‘Yas’m’ (p. 26).

The promise of being killed made to Vyry by John Morris Dutton’s wife if she still forgets to do her job of emptying Lillian’s chamber reinforces her plight on the American soil, for she lives with death daily. Vyry’s tortures from Salina become worse than before when she breaks one of her dishes. Instead of beating her because she avoids hurting herself, as she says: “Do you think I’m going to hurt myself whipping you?” (id.), Salina finds another punishment for her, as the author writes:

Vyry looked up and saw her mistress holding a closet door open. She hooked the strap to a nail, then, snatching up Vyry, she crossed her hands and caught them securely with the strap. Vyry’s toes barely touched the floor of the closet. Suddenly Big Missy slammed the door behind her and left Vyry hanging by her hands there in the darkness. Terribly frightened, the child did not whimper (p. 26).

One easily understands that an important part of Walker’s intention in writing such a text is to display black slaves’ plight during slavery. Knowing that Salina has hatred for her, Vyry
manages to work hard as a way to please her: “Vyry bent back to Big Missy’s hatred and struggled hard to please her” (p. 26). This sentence shows that Vyry has no alternative for her fate as a slave in Georgia. That is why she decides to be obedient to her mistress instead of rebelling against her.

One of the most powerful symbols of Blacks’ plight in this novel is formed in the following passage in which Vyry suffers the agony of watching Lucy who undergoes tortures from the overseer:

Vyry did not see them when they actually branded the girl (Lucy). She did not hear the hissing sound of the iron on the sizzling flesh. Her heart thumped in her so loudly that her eardrums throbbed so painfully that it was as if thunder were all around her in a whirling wheel of fire and blood and darkness so that she dropped in a dead faint on the dirt and brick floor (p. 95).

This passage briefly calls up a picture of an overseer taking infinite pain to annihilate a human being. A phrase like “a whirling wheel of fire and blood” serves to inform the reader that something tragic has just happened to the female slave. Walker does not quickly pass on this idea. She continues to develop it as fully and explicitly as possible through Grandpa Tom, another slave on the plantation who dies after he has had a whipping by Grimes:

Grandpa Tom still hesitated and refused to bring out the horses. Grimes grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and flung him out in the yard flat on his face in the dust. Grandpa Tom said nothing and make no effort to move. Then in a frenzy of anger Grimes took his bull whip, which he always carried, and cut across the old slaves’ back with such vigor the ragged shirt on his back quickly tore in two and the blood came streaming out. Grandpa Tom screamed in agony. (p. 57).

What Grandpa Tom undergoes from Grimes is just the everyday wrong treatments reserved to a black slave who does not obey his master. The beating inflicted on him is the consequence of his rebellion against his master’s order. One keeps in mind that a black slave has no preference before his master, no order to disobey to save his life, and no challenge on his behalf should be done to his master. The transgression of these laws by slaves always leads them to severe punishments or death. For some white masters, black slaves are mere beasts which do not deserve good treatments and have to undergo all forms of victimization. For, the words “whip, blood, and agony” linked to the word “pain”, are really taken from the lexicon of slavery, and recall that in the United States Blacks did not live better days, but hard times. It is indeed in this regard that a black soldier in And Then we Heard the Thunder by John Oliver Killens calls it “the United Snakes of America” (Killens: 1963, 87).

This kind of life experienced by slaves who were under the rule of bad masters pushed some slaves to confess that there was no difference to make between field slaves and household ones. According to them, the treatment was quite the same, and that there was no choice to make between both kinds of slaves:

House servant, field hand, it appeared to make no difference which one I was after all. I brooded on that revelation during three more seed times, my body moving over the work, my mind spinning off on its own. I came up into early womanhood troubled, restless, but aimlessly so (Heidish: 1976, 36).

Here, the reader is invited to understand that there is no difference at all between field slaves and domestic ones. In fact, despite the ironical kindness observed from some white masters, both categories of masters are just exploiting Blacks. To link the novelist’s fiction with history, the historian Gates writes:

House servant cared for the house and they cooked the meal, slaughtered the meat drove the carriages, and were personal servant to the master and his mistress of the household (Gates: 2003, 55).

As it can be seen, this passage shows that being a household is not a privilege or a good occupation, for households are always slaving as they are condemned to do the housework every day. This form of the black slaves’ victimization that the writer retraces cannot be limited to what I have just raised. I aim it to be extended to the notion of the contrast which also attests of their plight in a world ruled by Whites.

2. THE CONTRAST BETWEEN SLAVES AND MASTERS

In Walker’s Jubilee, the contrast first appears with the description of the Big House. This house is pictured as a very beautiful dwelling only reserved for white masters and their family, and as such black slaves cannot have a chance to live or sleep in it. Vyry who has spent a lot of days without visiting the inside of this house is amazed when she comes to discover Mrs. Salina and Miss Lillian’s bedrooms which are so attractive and
impressing thanks to “the richness of the lavish furnishing” (p. 17). This phrase suggests that Vyry’s amazing is the result of her poor conditions and bad treatments accorded to her since her childhood. She has never been given a chance to sleep in an outstanding house where she can try to forget about her position as a slave in Georgia. Here, the author tries to recall the historical moment when black slaves were prohibited to be seen in white Americans’ houses, as the Slave Codes required:

They could not visit the homes of whites or free Negroes; and they could not entertain such persons in their quarters. There were never to assemble unless a white person was present, and they were never to receive, possess, or transmit any incendiary literature calculated to incite insurrections (Franklin: 1947, 115).

Walker’s efforts to account for this aspect are evident in the passage in which she keeps on describing Big Missy’s bedroom as a way to draw the reader back to some historical moments of the United States:

In Big Missy’s bedroom there was a great oaken bed whose headboard nearly touched the high ceiling and the high mountain of feather mattresses always was covered with a snow-white counterpane (p. 17).

If the author focuses on describing Big Missy’s bedroom, it is because she wants to show that there is a great difference between Vyry’s cabin and Lillian’s room. The two girls are not conscious of their racial differences:

The two little girls often played together making mud pies, or running over the hillside playing hide-and-go-seek and playhouse under the big live oaks and shouting and laughing in fun (id.).

This passage shows how much Vyry and Lillian are so close to each other, but what one may find shocking is the fact that Vyry does not have the same advantages as Lillian although she is a little girl like her. She would normally deserve the same treatment as the one accorded to her daily close sister. Unfortunately, she is rejected and considered as inferior to Lillian because of her position as a slave. In presenting Vyry in such a way, the author draws the reader back to the ill-treatments black slaves were victims of during slavery, as Hernton recalls: “The tradition of narrative-chronicling the exigencies of black life in America began during slavery and took the forms of spirituals, or the sorrow songs” (Hernton: 1987, 124).

The contrast between the slaves and the masters’ lives is excessive that the author continues to account for it through the description of the Big House and cabins. In Jubilee, the slaves’ cabins are built of logs whereas the master’s Big House is a luxurious dwelling in which everything is found. There is plenty in the Big House but there is lack in the quarters:

Vyry was fortunate to be in the Big House, where the fires were burning in the iron grates and the kitchen was always a nice, comfortable place in winter. When she and Aunt Sally went out into the night after supper they had only a short distance to walk to the cabins built of logs and chinked with clay, only down the lane from the Master’s mansion. Consequently, they did not suffer from the cold (p. 50).

The word “supper” suggests that the slaves who live in the Big House are confronted to a modern way of life. There is no misery in this house because even the time to have breakfast, dinner, or supper is Known and respected. This way of life has nothing to have with that of those who live in the cabins where eating only occurs accidentally because of the lack of food. And the sentence “they did not suffer from the cold” shows how comfortable and beautiful the Big House is. The word “cabin” used in this passage is referred to as a shelter, usually made of wood. This kind of house is generally hot and becomes so boring for people to live in. And these conditions only reinforce the slaves’ plight on the plantation. Here, Walker’s description of the slaves’ lodging establishes the historical dimension of her novel. For, this description is also well made by a former slave named Booker T. Washington who gives a testimony of his own experience during slavery in the following terms:

The cabin was not only our living-place, but was also used as the kitchen for the plantation. My mother was the plantation cook. The cabin was light, and also the cold, chilly air of winter. There was a door to the cabin that is, something that was called a door but the uncertain hinges by which it was hung, and the large cracks... too small, made the room a very uncomfortable one (Washington: 1901, 16).

Actually, the sentence “something that was called a door” shows how unfashionable the slaves’ lodging was. For, it appears clearly that
this door as described by Washington was not really a door or could not deserve to be called as such, because it did not really look like a real door. Other examples linked to the contrast between the slaves and the masters’ lives are evidenced in Jubilee as follows:

August came and the slaves were busy picking cotton. The heat was so intensive that the field hands in the middle of the day said they felt like there were breathing air from a red-hot oven. It was so stultifying, so stifling and suffocated, that both Big Missy and Marse John went to the coast in savannah for a vacation (p. 109).

The phrase “picking cotton” emphasizes the slaves’ field activity, and the sentence “they were breathing air from a red-hot oven” indicates the slaves’ hard conditions of work. Here, the contrast is underlined by the fact that while black slaves are suffocating, masters go to the coast where air is fresh.

The title of chapter ten: “Wedding in the Big House and love in the Cornfields” (p. 85) is another reference to the contrast between the slaves and the masters’ lives. This title stresses on this contrast because the word “cornfields” is associated with the Blacks’ “animalness”, whereas “the Big House” is a luxurious symbol of civilization.

The contrast also appears through the author’s account for the easy jobs which are only given to the poor whites but not to black slaves who are doomed to do difficult ones: “The slaves claimed that the poor Whites were lazy and wanted the easy jobs, shifting the hard work on them, while the Whites got wages and the slaves got none” (p. 52).

What is unbelievable in this passage is that poor Whites and black slaves are all working for economical interests of their masters, but only the first are financially rewarded while the second have nothing despite the hard works shifted on them. This injustice put into practice by masters against black slaves, attests of the latter’s plight in a world ruled by Whites. The author keeps on reconstructing this injustice through another aspect linked to the contrast in the following terms:

Sometimes the poor white worker brought his family with him – women and children – but they only came for the midday meal of collards or peas and cornbread. While the black women and children worked in the fields, only the white men worked – leaving their women and children in wagons (pp. 52-53).

Here, the contrast appears between white women and black ones. While the first are missing at the moment of hard works and come only for meal at around noon, the second are condemned to work with their children in the fields without a significant rest. The privilege accorded to poor white women and their children is justified by the fact that they are white like their masters, and as such cannot deserve bad treatments reserved to Blacks because of the color of their skin. The notion of contrast becomes excessive that Walker continues to denounce it through the character of Salina who finds it impossible to take care of Blacks but Whites in case of sickness:

Granny Ticey and Mammy Sukey took charge because Big Missy said she wasn’t fooling with no niggers who had the plague, and she shooed all the rest of the slaves, including Aunt Sally (p. 24).

One sees that one of John Morris Dutton’s black slaves is seriously sick. Her wife, Salina refuses to take care of him, because she avoids being contaminated with the boy’s sickness which, she thinks, is from black people. That is why Granny Ticey and Mammy Sukey, knowing that they all belong to the black community, take charge of the sick boy without any hesitation.

As it can be seen, it is obvious that Walker’s narrative deals with the notion of contrast which evidences the black slaves’ plight on the American soil, but it would be misleading to end this exploration without examining the author’s account for the slaves’ nothingness.

4. THE BLACK SLAVES’ NOTHINGLESS

This subsection is indicative, for it suggests that black slaves are considered by their masters as inferior individuals who have limits on what they may do. In Walker’s Jubilee slaves appear like objects or simple goods that can be bought and sold at any time. This absolute reality can be justified by the fact that masters buy, sell, loan, or rent slaves whenever need is. These loaning and selling of several slaves appear clearly through the character of Aunt Sally who is sold just like an object:

Goodbye, honey, don’t yall forget to pray. Pray God to send his chillums a Moses, pray to Jesus to have mercy on us poor suffering chillums. Goodbye, honey, don’t forget Aunt Sally and don’t forget to pray (p. 17).

The name Aunt Sally is emblematic of the way white people used to name their slaves. While conveying the saves’ desire of freedom prevailing
among them during slavery, the writer also underscores the separation of slaves from their kin. This separation reinforces their sorrows, worries, cries, sufferings, and humiliations. For, it is a great shame for a human being to be sold like goods. What stands for a great shock to the slaves in this context is their awareness about their eternal separation. That is to say that when one of them is sold, he no longer comes back; he becomes like a dead person who can never be seen again. The writer’s intention seems to draw the reader back to the plight of black slaves and to associate the white man with evil.

In Jubilee there is another scene which refers to Vyry recalling her whipping on the plantation and showing its impact on her back to Innis Brown and Randall Ware:

She had thrown off piece after piece of her clothing, and now in the moonlight the two men stood horrified before the sight of her terribly scarred back. The scars were webbed and her back had ridges like a washboard... (pp. 405-406).

This passage recalls the tortures prevailing on plantations. In fact, the introduction of words such as “scar”, “webbed”, and “ridges” are essentially emblematic of the dehumanization of black people during slavery. One of the most powerful symbols of Blacks’ plight in this novel is formed by these “scars” which look like “a chokecherry tree with a trunk, branches, and even leaves” (p. 16). The ill-treatments inflicted on slaves are so excessive that the author continues to write:

He put his whip in his left hand, then took his right hand and reached in his belt, pulled out his pistol and shot him once. He held his pistol cocked as if to shoot again then, evidently thinking about it, he kicked him once more turning him over with his boot. Then he walked toward the stables to get those horses (p. 58).

In this passage the author shows the nothingness of black people, for Grandpa Tom is whipped and shot by Grimes, the overseer just because he has refused to take the horses out. The author’s words like “whip, pistol, shoot, kicked, and boot” demonstrate not only how savagely this slave character is whipped, but also how he is shot. This whipping associated with shooting pushes Vyry to think that Grandpa Tom can no longer be alive: “Vyry knew that he must die if he were not already dead. He was too old to stand a beating like that” (id...). Grandpa Tom’s refusal to take the horses out is not a way to disobey the overseer, but he fears his master who may blame him in case of the disappearance of his nice horses: “No, I don’t want Master’s good horses be mules in the fields and run hard in the hot sun. You’ll work them to death, then I’ll be blessed out and blamed for it” (p. 57). The author’s account for the slaves’ beatings by their masters attests of the historical dimension of her novel, for this question of beating is evidenced by the historian Benjamin Drew in an interview with James Steward, an ex-slave who escaped to Canada:

I was beaten at one time over the head by master, until the blood run from my mouth and nose: Then he tied me up in the garret, with my hands over my head—then he brought me down and put me in a little cupboard, where I had to sit cramped up, part of the evening, all night, and until between four and five o’clock, next day, without any food [...]. My brother was whipped on one occasion until his back was as raw as piece of beef, and before it go well, master whipped him again. His back was an awful sight (Drew: 1856, 355).

The novel also reads that slaves are forced to come and watch the hanging of two female slaves. This appears as a way for masters to show to slaves what may happen to them if they go against the will of their masters. Vyry who witnesses the scene is horrified by its atrocity:

Vyry witnesses the horrible scene, women fainted, but on the faces of some of the men and boys there was an unnatural look, neither human nor sane (pp. 103-104).

The expression “unnatural look” underlines the master’s brutality. Naturally slaves who are asked to assist the hanging are angry and unkind to their masters. For, this act is really inhuman. All these forms of mistreatments and wrong view of Whites over Blacks strongly demonstrated by the novelist are grounded in the black experience in the United States. For, these tortures, punishments, whippings, killings, and any other forms of Blacks’ victimization during slavery are described by some historians who tell the reader that black slaves are considered as their masters’ properties, and are prohibited to take any decision without their masters’ allowance. This makes sense because slaves being properties of their masters can be sold at any time by the latter:

A slave is the one who is the power of a master to whom he belongs. The master may sell him; dispose of his person, his industry and his labor. He can do nothing, posses nothing nor acquire
anything, but what must belong to his master (Goodell: 1853, 23).

This passage makes it clear that for white masters, selling slaves is a legal trade. This means that for them, it is not considered as an inhuman practice as viewed by Blacks who are victims of it.

Another aspect of Blacks’ nothingness is linked to sexuality. In fact, slave women must beget or give birth to children who will also become slaves even though their fathers are Whites. This policy pushes many white masters to have children with their slaves, and these newborn children are also used on plantations as slaves. In Jubilee a character named Hetta is both a slave and her master’s sex-object. She dies after she has been impregnated by her master, John Morris Dutton for the 16th time. Walker describes this mourning event in a very small passage when she writes:

It was Granny Ticey who closed Hetta’s eyes. In annoyance and chagrin, and partly in genuine sadness, pity and grief, tears rolled down her face (…). Soon it would be time to bathe the dead body and prepare it for an early burial (p. 14).

The author’s use of this passage is indicative, for words like “chagrin, sadness, pity, grief, tears, dead, and burial” linked to the word “death”, attest that Hetta is no more alive. And regarding the way she is sexually abused, one may say that she is nothing but a sex-object to her master. This wrongful practice is profitable to masters who, instead of spending money on buying other slaves, find it better to have sex with their slaves, sometimes through rape in order to have extra manpower. This appears as a real humiliation for black women who are raped and naturally fear to give birth to children who will simply suffer like themselves. This is exactly the case of Vyry who looks like Lillian just because both are Marse John’s daughters. But since Vyry is from a black slave mother, she is not treated the same way as Lillian whose mother is white. That is why, any attempt of Vyry’s resemblance to her half sister Lillian is rejected by the latter’s mother:

She heard the lady ask Big Missy, “My, but those children look so much alike, are they twins?” Vyry jumped when she heard the question and dared not turn her burning face in Big Missy’s direction. Big Missy’s cold angry voice hastened to correct the mistake. “Of course not. Vyry is Lillian’s nigger maid. John brought her here to be a playmate to Lillian because they’re around the same age, and Lillian has nobody else to play with. I must say they’re near the same size, but I never have seen where they look alike at all” (p. 18).

One understands that Vyry does not dare to look at Big Missy when she hears the question, because she avoids being blamed, punished or whipped by the latter who finds it as a humiliation, as she simply realizes that her husband has probably betrayed her by having a sexual relationship with a nigger slave who is Vyry’s mother. But even though, Big Missy does not want to say it openly to people, her daughter Lillian, knowing that Vyry is part of their family, voices it out: “Yes , Vyry’s my sister, and I love her dearly, and she loves me, too” (id.,). Lillian is certainly too young to know why her mother hates Vyry. All this stands for the nothingness of black people in a world ruled by Whites. Black women are humiliated for Whites’ self interests. And it is also clear that by white people’s so acting, one can say that they simply want to keep men slaves inferior to them by showing their incapacity to react against this humiliation faced by their wives. John Morris Dutton for example, shows Blacks’ incapacity to react against white masters’ brutality on them when he continues to perpetuate Vyry’s enslavement despite the decisions taken to ban slavery:

‘Think I forgot what I told you?’ ‘I promised to set you free when I die, didn’t I?’ ‘Got it in my will, right here!’ And he patted the books and papers beside his bed. ‘But I ain’t dead yet!’ (…). ‘You ain’t free till I die, and I ain’t dead yet’ (p. 161).

The novel also demonstrates that white masters’ dogs are more valued than black slaves. If a dog mangles a slave, masters appreciate the action. But, if a slave kills or poisons a dog, they find no alternative than killing him, as evidenced in this passage:

They concluded the dog was poisoned, that somebody had fed him powdered glass that cut his insides to pieces (…). Grimes said, ‘if I could only find the nigger that done it, I’d kill him’. But he didn’t know whom to kill and when he looked at his fine dog lying dead, his dog whom he dearly prized, tears stood in his eyes (pp. 53-54).

Here, the nothingness of black slaves is explained by the fact that Grimes who never cries for the death of a black slave, is crying now because his dog is dead. This means that white masters give more consideration to dogs than to black slaves.

Another aspect linked to the black slaves’ nothingness in the novel is the mangling of slaves...
by the masters’ dogs. In fact, slaves are not only killed by their masters in case of disobedience, but also mangled by dogs when the masters’ guards try to catch them as a way to take them back to the plantation:

There had also been a runaway slave whom the guards had caught, but he was not even claimed by his master because the dogs had mangled him to death and torn his body to pieces (p. 41).

This passage shows that black slaves are victims of cruel acts. Knowing that they have nowhere to go for protection, they are obliged to do with it. And this humiliation is highly evaluated that any other race can bear it. Walker’s reference to “dogs” running after slaves is indicative, for she wants to draw the reader back to the history of Blacks in the United States during slavery, as Carlisle recalls:

Owners often employed white overseers with dogs to direct the work. Since an overseer was subjected to instant dismissal if the slave did not produce profit, be either forced the slaves to work or found himself without a job. The most successful overseer drove the slaves ruthlessly (Carlisle: 1972, 73-74).

The use of dogs after black slaves when working is a way to prevent them from running away. In this context, black slaves are not viewed as human beings who deserve rest, but as animals which can work without resting. This attitude of white masters over slaves shows that slaves are doomed to sufferings and prefer to die, as Evayoulou writes: “The slave subjected to the rigours of the plantation life, and broken by hard work, sometimes prefers death to his life as a slave” (Evayoulou: 2010, 219).

In developing the theme of black slaves’ nothingness, Walker underlines a lot of mourning situations linked to the deaths of slaves who are doomed to die of sicknesses that can be treated easily. Because their masters do not take care of them, many of them die of diseases and the only thing their masters are supposed to do is to look for replacements:

Winter was also a time of much sickness, in summer there was very little illness on the plantation, but in winter there were constant coughs and sneezes, chills and fevers, sometimes deadly pneumonia. Some winters were worse than others; winters when the slaves seemed to sense, with some plague and death with it. Those were the winters when their numbers were dwindled by death. In the spring there would be new faces among them, for Master would send Grimes to buy replacements (p. 50).

One sees that wrongful death is an inevitable thing among slaves, because Dutton, the plantation owner and is wife, Salina are not willing to take care of their human properties in this sad experience of illness. They prefer to buy new men rather than keeping in good health the ones they already own. The sentence “their numbers were dwindled by death” suggests that the plantation usually has a lot of slaves on, but this number is likely to decrease because of their constant deaths that would mean nothing to their masters. Salina’s refusal of taking care of black slaves in case of sickness for example, has led to the death of one of their black saves. The author describes this mourning event in these terms:

Big Missy said she wasn’t fooling with no niggers who had who had the plague (...). When Big Ben and Rizzer saw that the sick boy was dying, they stayed to help the two old women. Twenty-four hours later Ben and Rizzer dug a fresh grave. By their second evening that new grave was filled. The dead boy was put naked into a feed sack, and then into a pine box in which he was hastily buried (p. 24).

The author’s use of words like “grave”, “dead”, and “buried” is very meaningful, for they attest of somebody’s death. This death is half caused by the slaves’ ill-treatment by their white masters who have no mercy on them.

The black slaves’ nothingness is also evident in the novel through the way the protagonist (Vyry) is asked to work as Lillian’s own slave since her childhood in her master’s house before she is sent on plantations: “The nigger Vyry starts working today as Lillian’s maid”. (p. 18). Vyry is later taken to the kitchen after the selling of Sally by Dutton where she satisfies the tastes of her master: “Vyry took her place in the emergency. Thus, she began her life as cook in the Big House” (p. 72). If for John Morris Dutton Vyry is a daughter like Lilian, but full of financial interests in the future, Vyry is for Salina just a “little nigger” in the service of Lilian who, like her mother, becomes so proud to have Vyry as a maid: “She is going to be my own individual maid all the time” (id.,). Lilian’s wish is exhausted as soon as possible by her parents who tell Vyry what she is supposed to do everyday:

Vyry was told to empty Miss Lillian’s little china chamber pot and see that it was washed outdoors and dried in the sun and brought in before bed-time and put under Miss Lillian’s bed (p. 25).
As it can be seen, Vyry who is still a little girl like Lillian is forced to work as Lillian’s maid just because she is from a slave mother. In fact, Vyry and Hetta’s lives mirror each other. For, like Vyry who acts as a slave in her teens, her mother, Hetta is also given to John Morris Dutton as a slave since her childhood to be his sex-object, as his father’s teachings require:

His father gave him Hetta when she was still in his teens and was barely more than a pickaninny (...). Anyway it was his father who taught him it was better for a young white 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 (p. 8).

This way of life experienced by Hetta and Vyry and denounced by the author has a direct link with the history of the United States. For, sexual abuses, tortures, whippings, sufferings, disappearances, and all forms of bad treatments inflicted on slaves “are conceptual tools which form the historical core in Margaret Walker’s novel” (Evayoulou: 2009, 46).

It is clear that black slaves’ living conditions on plantations as seen throughout the above passages, are very bad and mostly characterized by perpetual tortures due to their masters’ wrong view on them. However, one may observe a complementary link between slaves and their masters. Black slaves cannot do without white masters and neither can do the latter without slaves, for their economy depends on the results of the slaves’ hard work on plantations. This means that there is an unbreakable relation between these subjected individuals and their masters. This relation is explained by the fact that the masters’ wonderful life, comfort, and wealth are only possible if their slaves do a very good work on plantations. The black slaves’ plight that the author retraces does not derive from her own imagination. It is exactly what happened to black slaves in America during slavery as a way for Whites to keep them inferior to them and in a total ignorance of intellectual notions, as shown by Frederick Douglass, a former slave who recalls the way his mistress’s husband reacts when he surprises his wife teaching him how to read:

If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world... if you teach that nigger how to read there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be as slave. He would at once become unmanagable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontent and unhappy (Douglass: 1845, 49).

CONCLUSION

Margaret Walker’s account in Jubilee is drawn from the American history. The ill-treatments shown through words like blames, punishments, whippings, tortures, humiliations, killings, and many other forms of Blacks’ victimization contextualized by the author are conceptual tools that form historical core in this narrative. Apart from the ironical kindness of some white masters who may buy clothes, shoes, or have mercy on their slaves, there are many dramatic events which attest not only of the white masters’ wrong view over black slaves, but also of the slaves’ nothingness in a world ruled by Whites. Through Blacks’ plight in the United States during slavery, one may say that Walker has succeeded in exploring the literary question which consists in representing time and space in a work of fiction.

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