

Women and gender studies essay example

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Analysis of Jubilee by Margaret Walker

Religion played various roles in the lives of the characters in Jubilee. Discuss the role of religion in the novel. How did different characters or groups of characters shape or reshape religion to meet their needs? What parts of the bible did each group emphasize?

Religion takes two major contrasting roles in this novel. To one group, the white people, it is a justification of superiority over the black people, while for the black people; it is a source of hope and a place of refuge.

The novel Jubilee written by Margaret Walker depicts the African American history in three periods. These periods are during slavery, the American civil war and during the reconstruction process that followed the war period. The novel is based on the life of the author's great-grand mother, Margaret Duggans Ware Brown. Her great-grandmother was born a slave and was married to a free black man, Randall Ware. Margaret great-grandfather was a blacksmith. Key to note also is that her great-grand father was born a free man. The setting of this novel is the Dutton plantation. This is where her great-grandmother was born as the daughter of the plantation owner.

The main character in this novel is Vyry, a young woman who is half white and half black. Her father Master John is the owner of the plantation in which Vyry and her mother Sis Hetta dwell in. Sis Hetta dies when Vyry is still a very small girl and thus Aunt Sally takes up the motherly role and brings up Vyry. Vyry is not legally recognized as Master John's daughter and is despised by Miss Salina who is the legal wife of Master John. Miss Salina as many other white mistresses were is very cruel and harsh to the colored and black slaves.

The novel brings out various themes inherent in this society. Among the deeply entrenched theme was that of religion. The African Americans were and still are very religious people. At that time, they ascribed almost everything that happened in their lives to their spiritual believes. The novel begins with a vivid description of Sis Hetta's death. She had apparently bore 15 children and was just approximately 29 years old. Speculation had it that most of these children were fathered by Master John. Her kind gathers to console her as she labors with pain giving birth to yet another baby during her last times on earth. Master John or rather John Morris Dutton had almost married Sis Hetta, but was compelled to look for a white wife. That is when she goes in search of a wife and comes back with Salina from Savannah. The theme of religion is evident from the beginning of this novel. During the time of Sis Hetta's death, Brother Ezekiel or rather Brother Zeke as they fondly referred to him asks Sis Hetta what she would like him do for her before she dies. " Sis Hetta, I'm here, Brother Zeke, it's me. Can I do something for you?" (Walker, 1999). In response to this, Sis Hetta says " pray," " Pray" (Walker, 1999). In Brother Ezekiel's prayer it is evident that they sought refuge in religion. Brother Ezekiel addresses God as their father and kind of pleads with God to come take Sis Hetta as she suffers on her death bed like He did to Lishy. They seem to have a strong belief of life after death. Brother Ezekiel especially lays emphasis on the story of father Abraham and the crossing of the river Jordan by the Israelites as they headed to Canaan. He uses these parts of the bible figuratively to denote that where Sis Hetta is about to go is a place of joy and comfort and not of pain and suffering as the earth. This is just to console those left behind. This

creates a mental picture of those left behind that Sis Hetta's suffering would be no more after her death.

The white community view of religion was quite different. Majority had the notion that they had been created superior beings on the account of their skin color. They despised any white person who according to them stooped so low as to associate freely with the Africans as Master John did. From the novel; it is evident that they had respect for Miss Salina, Master John's wife than they had for Master John " she ain't no loving namby-pamby like that s. o. b. pretty boy she's married to (Walker, 1999). The way Miss Salina treated the niggers as the black skinned people were referred to was the ideal way that the blacks ought to have been treated. " She knows how to handle niggers and keep establishment she is a real Christian woman a high quality lady who knows and acts the difference between niggers and white people (Walker, 1999). This clearly shows that, to the white people, religion allowed them the mandate to be masters and rulers over the black people. To them, black people were low class people and were to be treated the way Miss Salina treated them. The white people use religion as a tool of oppression over the black people.

Religion is really kind of a solace to the black folk. Aunt Sally irrespective of how tired she would be never failed to go to Brother Ezekiel's meetings. Brother Ezekiel's teachings mostly were drawn from the story of Moses in the Old Testament and the deliverance of the children of Israel. This was in reflection to the kind of deliverance the black folks ever wished for. It kind of gave them hope that someday, if they kept their faith strong and believed in God, the He (God) would send them a Moses to deliver them from their

bondage of slavery. “ he admonished his flock to have faith in God and He would send them a Moses, a deliverer to free His people” (Walker, 1999). The secrecy of Brother Ezekiel’s meetings indicates that the African slaves had a mission to free themselves. To them, religion was a tool in which they would finally use to deliver themselves from the bondage of slavery. The passages from the book of Moses about deliverance really gave them hope of deliverance. This is why Aunt Sally was so determined in attending each and every of Brother Ezekiel’s meetings. Vyry was sternly warned never to say a word about these meetings.

Much as they were oppressed, the African Americans knew and believed that someday, they were going to be freed from slavery. They held steadfastly to this hope and cringed on religion to strengthen their hope and conviction. This was the most important function of religion to them other than giving them consolation and comfort. This also was the most significant difference between the niggers and the white people perception of religion. It spans all across this novel, “ Jubilee.”

Reference

Walker, M. (1999). Jubilee. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt