

*Nirupama Dey,

M. Phil Research Scholar,

Assam University, Diphu Campus

India

** Dr. Shreyashi Mukherjee,

Assistant Professor,

Assam University, Diphu Campus

India

Email id: niru11992@gmail.com

*A Study of Race and Gender in *Dessa Rose**

This chapter presents Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* as a neo-slave narrative that not only concentrates on the exploitation faced by black women in slavery, but also portrays a white woman in the novel who is not the victim of slavery but of sexism. At the same period in twentieth century when other major writers present predominately the plight of black women in slavery, Williams has shown how a black and a white woman can fight together for racial and gender equality despite having different racial experiences.

The story of these two women starts with friction but slowly they come close and trust each other. This bonding between them is not only unique but also strong because they find greater strength in each other. Williams presented them in such situation that could increase mutual understanding and dismantle stereotypical thinking about races. However, the novel also shows the difficulty in creating such a bond. The friendship between two women happens when

Dessa and Rufel understand they need each other. They start knowing each other which helps them to understand condition of woman irrespective of race.

Dessa Rose is an imaginary story of two strong women who were involved in two actual accidents. In 1829, in Kentucky a pregnant black woman was sentenced to death for helping a group of slaves headed to the market for sale. In 1830, North Carolina a white woman living on an isolated farm was reported to have given haven to the runaway slaves. Sherley Anne Williams says in her Author's Note that she first read about the incident of black woman in Angela Davis's essay "Reflection on the Black Woman's role in the Community of Slaves" where Davis wrote that of the six leaders sentenced to death, one was a woman who was first permitted for reasons of economy, to give birth to her child. Afterwards, she was publicly hanged. While tracking Davis to her source in Herbert Aptheker's work Williams discovered the incident of the white woman (Williams 5). In the novel the author writes in her note, "How sad, I thought then, that these two women never met"(5) and tries to bring these two women under the same umbrella in her novel. This essay presents Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* as a neo-slave narrative that not only concentrates on the exploitation faced by black women in slavery, but also portrays a white woman in the novel who is not the victim of slavery but of sexism. At the same period in twentieth century when other major writers present predominately the plight of black women in slavery, Williams has shown how a black and a white woman can fight together for racial and gender equality despite having different racial experiences.

The black woman Dessa has been portrayed as a lover, a daughter, a sister, a revolutionary, a mother and a business partner. In the novel she is awaiting her own death, by hanging. She had been sold away because she violently attacked her master who had viciously murdered Kaine, her lover. Her mistress assumed that Dessa attacked her master because there

was some sexual liaison between Dessa and the master and ordered Dessa to be punished with a symbolic branding on her genitals and sold for profit. While on the slave trader's coffle, pregnant Dessa successfully initiates and leads a rebellion in which several white men are killed. Though she is sentenced to be hanged, her execution is delayed until the birth of her child. Dessa's fate changes when Dessa becomes friend with three black men Nathan, Cully and Harker who rescue her from Nehemia enabling her amazing second escape from slavery. These newly free slaves find haven in a white woman's farm whose gambler husband has abandoned her with her two children. Thus, Williams succeeds in writing the novel weaving these two incidents together.

The theme of bondage and freedom are complicated in Williams' depiction of her enslaved protagonist Dessa Rose. Since the novel has been narrated from three different point of view so it develops in three parts. "The Darky" presents a white man Nehemiah, an author who wants to gain fame by writing about Dessa's crime. This section is told from the white writer Nehemia's point of view. Though he asks questions to Dessa, he is unwilling to accept her answers as truth. The next part titled "The Wench" primarily treats the relationship between Dessa and Rufel. Here it is seen how Dessa hates a white woman Rufel just because she is white and Rufel though a white does not bear any dislike against Dessa. The last part "The Negress" presents Dessa Rose' first person narrative voice. This section suggests a more dignified gender and racial representation. In this chapter, she fully succeeds in escaping from her master with the help of Rufel and Aunt Chole who is an old black woman. At the end of the novel, Dessa and Rufel come close and share understanding of race and gender oppression.

Sherley Anne Williams in 1986 wrote about slavery and the hardships experienced by blacks before Civil War in America. She looks back to the historical past of her people to remind the world the struggle they faced to survive. Even in 1980s , after more than one hundred years

of Civil War, she felt the necessity to look back which is a predominant feature of Neo-slave narrative. In 1960s, Neo-slave narrative emerged as a literary form and it affected the style of representing slavery. It is not completely a new genre but logical continuity of slave narrative. Neo-slave narrative is used to speak back to the institution of slavery which is still capturing the mind of the African Americans. In *Rethinking the Slave Narrative* Charles J. Heglar mentions Bernard W. Bell description that “neo-slave narratives” is “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (148). Slave narrative gives account of the sorrowful condition of the slaves but neo-slave narrative demands the right of blacks. In *Dessa Rose* the central character Dessa is fighting for her right.

Along with Neo-slave narratives during 1960 with the development of Women’s Right Movement in America, the interest of the readers shifted from the rights of black to the rights of women. Publishers and readers became more receptive to the black women writers and writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Sarah Wright, Gayl Jones, Sherley Anne Williams and many others published many popular novels even before 1983. These prominent women writers felt the need of looking back to slavery and its consequences and present the lives of black women in their fictions. Majority of these black women writers were concerned with the suffering of women who were either slaves or victim of racism. In the midst of all these writings in 1986 Sherley Anne Williams produced something different. Her novel *Dessa Rose* shows not only the dilemma of black women but also the exploitation suffered by white women in sexist society. *Dessa Rose* is a typical neo-slave narrative where the author situated in 20th century is remembering the memory of slavery in order to record the resilience of black women. In this novel the central character Dessa leads a journey from bondage to freedom.

The women writers of 20th century have brought to light the relation between maternity and womanhood: “black women are maternal and thus true women” (Patton 121). Motherhood is an aspect of femininity and also right to one’s child. In *Dessa Rose*, Dessa’s punishment was delayed to have the baby in slavery but the need of a mother for the baby was not valued. Thus motherhood in slavery was not rooted in women’s desire but in white men’s desire to commerce in black bodies. The slave owners did not want their slaves to be troubled by family. If the mothers engaged themselves in bringing up their children the masters had to suffer the loss of workers. The slave women’s primary duty was to serve their masters and nothing else.

From the beginning, the novel makes clear these limitation imposed on black slaves and centralizes motherhood as both hope and despair. Dessa is already a slave when she first meets Kaine, her lover. She becomes pregnant and Kaine wants her to abort the baby. Dessa asks Kaine to run away to the North which Kaine refuses as he is afraid of being caught. Dessa decides that her primary duty is now to save her child. She takes her pregnancy as an opportunity to run away from slavery. Her baby becomes a source of hope for her. She wants her child to be secure and have a freedom just like white children. It is not an accident that slavery and motherhood are often linked in the writing of black women; most often slavery denied motherhood to black women because their children were sold or they themselves could be sold to new masters, separating them from their children. Williams has portrayed a number of mothers in her story and each of them experiences different dilemmas as a mother. Where Dessa is worried about her baby when she is only pregnant, her mother has already lost her ten children only because of slavery:

Dessa heaved herself to her knees, flinging her words in the white woman’s face.

“Mammy gave birth to ten children that come in the world living.” She counted them off

on her fingers. “The first one Rose after herself; the second one died before the white folks named it... Little Rose died while mammy was carrying Amos (another child)- carried off by the diphtheria. (Williams 119)

White antebellum culture predominately saw female slaves as mere breeders, and not mothers. This was an attempt to strip female slaves of their gender. Exploiting black women as breeders objectified them as less than human because only animals can be bred against their will. Thus, the black Dessa asserting her right to be a mother and choosing to protect her baby by running away becomes a critique of race and gender oppression.

In the novel Dessa’s fight for identity reveals her personal, racial and sexual history. From the beginning the character of Dessa is seen to be very brave and confident. She does not bear torture silently neither does she submit herself to any master. Her decision not to abort the baby but to run away is based on her awareness that as a slave she cannot be the kind of mother that she wants to be because she would have no authority over her offspring. She presents her reasoning thusly, “this Kaine and it be like killing part of him, part of me. So I talk with him; beg him. I say, ‘This our baby; ours, us’s. How you can say, kill it? It mine and it yours.’...and finally I say ‘Run’ and he laugh.” (Williams 46). Dessa at the cost of anything is ready to have the baby and she will never give her baby to the white folk; neither will she end its life. She knows the fearful consequences of her desire to become a successful mother and still, she is ready to bear all. As a slave she is not seen as a mother or a woman, but by escaping Dessa could claim motherhood, womanhood, and freedom. Her undaunted will becomes clear in her actions; when master kills Kaine, she attacks master; when Nehemia wants her to tell her story as he wants, she protests; when white Rufel names mammy as her mother she protests and asks if mammy had a choice in becoming Rufel’s care giver.

In Rufel's plantation, Dessa claims her right to her body and refuses to let Rufel read her through the scars on her body. Dessa tries to hide her scars which records her subalternity in slavery. She feels seeing her scar means reading herself. She cannot allow a white woman to know her and her pain. Even after Dessa's attempts to hide her scars, Rufel discovers it and she gets horrified: "Rufel shivered; that couldn't be true, it was too, too awful, she thought; ...she could almost feel the fire that must have lived in the wench's thighs... "what a horrid story," (Williams 134-35). Though Rufel understands Dessa's pain, but she can never understand how these scars define Dessa's life. The marks on Dessa's body tell her history and the master's authority upon her. By not revealing all these to Rufel, Dessa is claiming right on her body.

The most important and most exclusive part of the novel is the relationship between Dessa and Rufel. As Nicole R. King says, "the characterizations of the two female protagonists, Dessa and Rufel, and the evolution of their relationship, can be read as the site of the text's most deconstructive achievements; they highlight the protean nature of meaning given mercurial contexts." (King 351). Williams in this novel posits skin color as the site of the historic animosity rooted in binary that characterizes black-white race relations. Employing two women of two different races, she shows the possibility to combat this historic division.

The story of these two women starts with friction but slowly they come close and trust each other. This bonding between them is not only unique but also strong because they find greater strength in each other. Williams presents them in such situation that could increase mutual understanding and dismantle stereotypical thinking about races. However, the novel also shows the difficulty in creating such a bond. For example, though Rufel colludes with Dessa to dupe white slaver buyers, there is as yet no bond between both women. The friendship between two women happens when Dessa and Rufel understand they need each other. As Dessa says,

“you cannot do something like this with someone and not develop some closeness, some trust” (Williams 225). They start knowing each other which helps them to understand condition of woman irrespective of race.

In their respective places both the women are lonesome. Dessa’s lover Kaine is no more and she has no news about her brothers and sisters. Rufel’s husband is not with her. The difference of race that creates distrust between them is much stronger than need for a friend and companionship. For Dessa to have a white friend is nothing but an insult to their entire race. Moreover, Rufel nurses Dessa’s boy and this complicates the way Dessa sees race. This anomalous behaviour of a white woman being a wet nurse to a black child—an act which black women do for white women—threatens Dessa’s identity as a black woman. It is opposite to what she learnt about whites in the past. As the narrative says, “it went against everything she had been taught to think about white women but to inspect the fact too closely was almost to deny her own existence” (123). Dessa looks at Rufel’s white skin and identifies it with racial privilege which reminds Dessa of her plight. She with great amazement looks at Rufel, just like Nehemiah looked at her: “She watched the white woman sitting in the light from the long window... Her face was very white and seemed to radiate a milky glow...” (86). Dessa every moment is observing Rufel and Dessa finds it surprising that a white woman is not torturing the black but helping them. Rufel’s helpful attitude towards blacks in spite of her white skin seem mystifying to Dessa.

Slavery and racism are closely related to whiteness. The binary between color is at the root of all the troubles. The blacks see the whiteness of the white people as power structure which is an invisible dominance. The white folk and their white body stand for power and blacks feel that this privilege of color enable the whites to control them. Their color seem to the whites

normal and the power hidden in them is invisible to them. As Ruth Frankberg says, “dealing with racism is not merely an option for white people—that, rather, racism [as whites privilege] shapes white people’s lives and identities in a way that is inseparable from other facets of daily life” (6). This power of one race on the other is the cycle of oppression. It is a continuous process which influence both the races. The color white creates such trauma for the black that the latter is even afraid of looking directly at eyes of other. This is also shown in the novel; Dessa sees Rufel but their eyes never meet. In plantation blacks were not allowed to look directly at whites and they were even punished for looking at the whites. bell hook has significantly discussed this politicization of gaze:

Amazed the first time I read in history classes that white slave owners (men, women, and children) punished enslaved black people for looking, I wondered how this traumatic relationship to the gaze had informed black parenting, and black spectatorship. The politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze. (hooks 115)

This limitation made the whites mysterious for the black. Though Dessa hates Rufel, she always observes her as if trying to discover the mystery of the color that creates all inequality.

Williams has used two characters to portray an exceptional situation. She posted a white character so that she can expose the scar of racial oppression, understand white racial privilege and fight against racism and sexism. She was upset by the conflict between black and white feminism and wanted to create a space where both black and white feminism can form companionship. In an interview Williams herself says that she hopes that the novel would “heal some wounds” created by racism. She also added that the job of fiction is “understanding the impossible” and by bringing these two historical women, she “could come to understand

something not only about their experience of slavery but about them as women, and imagine the basis for some kind of honest rapprochement between black and white women” (qtd in *Race Mixing* 88). The novel has taken us to a different place where as readers we are not accustomed to go. She has attempted a historical issue but the core subject of her novel, white-black friendship, is rare. More than historical, the novel has imaginative value. Williams creates this alternative to racial hatred not only through the relationship between Dessa and Rufel but also by positing a white mammy Rufel instead of a black mammy. During slavery it was a common thing for white children to be brought up by slave woman whom the white children called mammy. Here we see how Dessa’s son who is a black is fed by a white woman. As Patton says, “Thus Williams replaces the image of the black mammy with that of the white mammy” (136).

Williams’ novel brings Rufel vulnerable to gender violence that shocks Dessa and changes Dessa’s thinking of skin-color as the only hierarchy. When Rufel, Dessa and Harkar for their business purpose spend a night in a new plantation, the owner Mr. Oscar when drunk tries to rape Rufel. Both Dessa and Rufel together force him to leave the room. This event reveals white patriarchy’s sexist way of looking at woman as sexual object. Williams employs the attempted rape of Rufel by Oscar, a white man to reveal the gender similarities across the color-line. This scene discloses that condition of women is not based simply on their race. White women also are victim of the same exploitative and sexist society that creates and perpetuates slavery. In the novel, the women are exploited irrespective of their race and their existence is valued very little. When he employs gendered slurs such as “slut”, “sly bitch”, and “devil woman” (Williams 22), it is not merely Dessa’s race that is being held in contempt, but her gender as well. When the drunken white planter Oscar tries to rape Rufel, Dessa feels that white and black women are subject to men’s laws and desires in sexist society:

The white woman was subject to the same ravishment as me; this the thought that kept me awake. I hadn't knowd white men could use a white woman like that, just take her by force as they could with us...I never will forget the fear that come on me when Miz Lady called me on Mr. Oscar, that knowing that she was as helpless in this as I was, that our only protection was ourselves and each other. (Williams 201)

If black women bodies were used in slavery, white women were valued in sexist society for their pure bodies. Premarital virginity was connected to idea of property and ensured that future slave-masters would be biologically "White." Regardless of social class, whites were encouraged to fear racial amalgamation, deriving from a belief in superiority of white race and feeling the same in turn. The white men treat the white women as biological reproducers of race and class privilege and the black women as beasts of burden giving coin to the master to maintain race and class privilege. Though it is difficult to see connections between white women and black women, the novelist succeeds in showing both groups of women as pawns of white men.

As Dessa saves Rufel from Oscar the later also saves Dessa, at the end of the novel, from Nehemiah who stands for slavery. Though Rufel has to bear all the insult by the white man who calls her slut, she remains determined to not let Dessa go with him. She ignores what Nehemiah says and claims Dessa to be hers, "“this girl mines,” Miz lady say. “Can't be no reward on her.”- “just mistook my girl for someone else” (227). Here, Rufel uses her privilege that comes from her white skin colour to save Dessa. Dessa understands the new relation between them which is based on trust. Moreover they finally recognise each other as individual. Rufel says, “My name Ruth...I ain's your mistress,” and Dessa says, “my name Dessa, Dessa Rose. Ain't no O to it” (232). By rejecting the O, Dessa signals her rejection of others inscriptions on her body. This confidence in Dessa signals that Dessa is no more a slave mentally: “I didn't hold nothing against

her, 'not mistress', not Nathan, not skin" (233). Williams shows beautifully how gradually Dessa's hatred comes to an end when she discovers the strength of sisterhood crossing the racial barrier.

The progress of Dessa and Ruth's friendship finally undermines historical circumstances. Williams shows that by staying together, a colored woman and a white woman can overcome hatred. She also shows that interracial friendship among those unequal in power is possible if the person on top of the hierarchy understands the reality of the person of lower status and is desirous of bridging gaps. King writes in this regard:

Both Dessa and Rufel come to realize that their new relationship is neither sinister nor temporary but rather the beginning of interdependence and trust, a friendship of mutuality and individuality. Though Williams strips these two protagonists and their world of the stereotypical constructions of mistress, slave and mammy, she refuses to strip them of difference as it is manifest in race and class. They are allowed to understand how even the most intimate relationships are complicated by experiences of power and by notions of identity. (366)

The bond between Dessa and Rufel is rare in history. Their relationship has overcome many tests and has become unique. They learn from their experiences how racial and gender problems are interlinked.

Williams' two protagonists represent two races on opposite sides color-line, but she as an author chooses to be impartial when depicting two races. When white women writers present trans-racial friendships, they usually privilege the moral growth of their white woman protagonist through her relationship with black friend, and white women in novels by black writers are rarely represented as conscious of the racially defined context. Other texts that

explore the history of cross-racial relationship between white and black women tend to focus on the difficulties of the association. They look back to slavery and the struggle for women suffrage where black women were rarely given center stage. Where feminism is divided on the basis of color and fails to unite the white and black women under the same umbrella, *Dessa Rose* is a praiseworthy work which imagines a world where the black and white women can not only coexist but also support each other. This is perhaps the first step in creating a racially integrated America that acknowledges and tries to move beyond the sins of slavery and racism.

Works cited

Aptheker, Herbert. *African Negro Slave Revolts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1943.

Print.

Davis, Angela. "Reflection on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves". A

Turbulent Voyage: Readings in African American Studies. Ed. Floyd Windon Hayes.

USA: A Collegiate Press Book, 2000. 83-96. Print

Frankenberg, Ruth. *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Woman, Race Matters*.

Minneapolis: University, 1993. Print

Heglar Charles J. *Rethinking the Slave Narrative: Slave Marriage and the Narratives of*

Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft. USA: Greenwood Press, 2001. Print

hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: New York, 1992. Print.

Jones, Suzanne W. *Race Mixing: Southern Fiction Since the Sixties*. USA: The John Hopkins

University Press, 2006. Print

King, Nichole R. "Meditations and Mediations: Issues of History and Fiction in *Dessa*

Rose." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 76. 2/3 (1993): 351-368. JSTOR. Web. 3

November, 2016.

Patton, Venetria K. *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction*.

New York: State University of New York Place, 2008. Print.

Williams, Sherley Anne. *Dessa Rose*. New York: Harper Collins, 1986. Print