

# Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*: White Women, Black Men

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**Abstract**—The controversial portrayal of the emotional and psychological impact of the intimate relationships between white masters and black slaves in the antebellum south gives rise to discussions deeply rooted in cultural ideology, psychoanalysis, and feminist perspectives. The master-female slave relationship has received a lot of attention, but because of certain sensitivities, the discussion surrounding the relationship between white mistresses and black male slaves is handled carefully. This study explores the complex representation of the sexual interracial activities in Sherley Anne Williams's 1986 novel, *Dessa Rose*, focusing on black male slaves and privileged white women. Revealing societal ambivalence, the analysis accentuates the reversal of traditional power dynamics between white and black characters. Concurrently, it challenges latent misconceptions related to the white mistress's condition and role in antebellum Southern culture. Williams, through her novel, lays bare the intricacies of power dynamics, oppression, and resistance. The study suggests that this unconventional relationship foreshadows the eventual downfall of the antebellum South.

**Index Terms**—Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose*, white women, black slaves, interracial relationship

## I. INTRODUCTION

The controversial portrayal of the sexual relationship between the white master and his black female slave has consistently sparked controversy, leading to lengthy discussions and debate in the light of cultural ideology, psychoanalytic theory, and feminist writings. However, some scholars cautiously approached the discussion of the relationship between the white mistress and the black male slave due to the array of problems and sensitivities this argument might generate (Bourke, 2007; Caron, 2008; Foster, 2011; Hodes, 1997). Slave narrative literature has reflected such ambivalence in approaching the sexual experience within the cultural ideology of the time. Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, first published in 1986, stands as a rich literary work in its depiction of different images of spermatic societal sexual behaviors as well as images of miscegenation. The portrayal of sexual racial and interracial activity in Williams's *Dessa Rose*—more especially, the connections between black slave men and privileged white women—provides an important framework for examining the ambiguity that permeated antebellum Southern culture. This ambivalence reveals latent societal flaws and reflects a world incapable of sustaining sexual relationships across different races. It is characterized by the battle between races and the desire to maintain the superiority of white masters/mistresses. This paper explores how these relationships shed light on the complex dynamics of power, oppression, and resistance, foreshadowing the downfall of the antebellum South.

A set of notions that are constructed within the American cultural ideology and instilled in the collective unconscious of the society shapes a pervasive representation of the sexual dynamics between white supremacists and black slaves during the era of slavery. Some of these notions include power imbalances, racial hierarchies, and dehumanization of slaves, encompassed and protected by a legal framework. White slave owners held a position of absolute authority over their slaves, extending to control over their bodies and sexual agency, often with impunity. In addition to being forced into intimate relationships with their white masters, female slaves fell victims to rape by their masters. Rape was not always the norm in this interracial encounter; some romantic arrangements like “concubinage-type arrangements and even long-term romantic partnerships, perhaps most famously that of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings, were known to exist” (Anon, 2013, p. 1). Conversely, white masters often encouraged slave marriages or sexual relationships among their enslaved population. This policy was driven by several considerations. Firstly, it was believed that married slaves were less likely to pose a threat through rebellion or escape, as their familial ties deterred such actions. Additionally, from a capitalist perspective, the master saw a significant advantage in endorsing slave marriages. By increasing the number of enslaved individuals, the master could expand their property and subsequently profit from selling the offspring. Furthermore, in cases where a female slave became pregnant by the master, a grim practice emerged. The master typically awaited the birth of the child before selling both the mother and baby to different plantations.

This strategy aimed to prevent the development of family bonds or traditions among the enslaved mother and her children, further emphasizing the transactional nature of slavery. It was considered an “act of betrayal” towards generations of the slave family to shatter their history and weaken their tradition and power (Jacobs, 2001, p. 52). The fate that awaited a slave family is that the father, the mother and the children were sold to different places, plantations, destinations, and owners so that the master acclaimed a complete hegemony to the history and tradition of his slaves. The

dehumanizing conditions of slave owners rendered slaves to sustain romantic ideals between male and female slaves because they were considered a property owned by the master, devoid of the autonomy to build a family. Regrettably, there were serious repercussions for some African male slaves who tried to establish families under these harsh conditions. Their masters, who were determined to keep everything under control, threatened to whip them, sell them, or even kill them. These men were also powerless when they witnessed the master abusing their women. Jacobs (2001) succinctly asked, “why does the slave ever love? Why allow tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence” (p. 37). These dehumanizing acts can be seen as part of the power imbalance, racial hierarchy, and white patriarchal authority.

But what about the power dynamics inherent in the relationship between female slave owners and their slaves? In *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*, Jones-Rogers (2019) relied on testimonies of former slaves who experienced such atrocities in the plantations along with court records to demonstrate white women’s participation in the exploitation and dehumanization of male slaves. She noted that “southern white women’s roles in upholding and sustaining slavery form part of the much larger history of white supremacy and oppression [...] they were not passive bystanders. They were co-conspirators” (p. 205). Jones-Rogers defied the conventional notion that southern white women were passive, confined to domestic role, deeply pious, and morally upright. In one of the testimonies, a slave owning couple in Georgia, Elisha Betts and Maria, suffered from the loss of the husband’s mercantile business and Maria supported the most. Elisha “saw a side of his wife that surprised him” (p. 57). He admitted that “Maria was an excellent housekeeper, though she was ‘inclined to be self-willed and not obedient to his wishes’” (p. 58). Furthermore, Jones-Rogers (2019) presented incidents where “slave- owning husbands sometimes found their wives’ violence toward enslaved people so disturbing that they could not ignore it and felt compelled to intervene” (p. 72). This observation casts doubt on the notion that slave owning households functioned in a unified and uncompromising fashion, demystifying the conventional image about southern belles. It draws attention to the complex dynamics that existed within these homes, questions the gender role and the stereotypical image of the maternal moral white woman. It also shows that some people had to deal with the cruelty and violence that came with being a slave, even in an oppressive system.

Southern women were seen inferior to men, physically and intellectually. They were “prisoners in disguise” (Clinton, 1982, p. 145) as their movement was restricted and their freedom was restrained regardless of the luxuries their class and race provided in away. What was expected from them is that they had to fulfill their societal role of obedience, “sexual purity, sustained by restraint, prudence, and modesty” (Elder, 2012, p. 584). They were very bored when their husbands would travel for business or for another reason. As they were secretly unhappy with their lives, they had to find an occupation. Being behind of the plantation owner in terms of importance, some women exploited their slaves in certain ways. They supervised the work of the slaves in the plantation, bought and sold slaves like Mathilda Bushey (Jones-Rogers, 2019, p. 144), ran brothels staffed by enslaved people (Jones-Rogers, 2019, p. 146), and had affairs with their slaves (Anon, 2013, p. 1). Affairs between mistresses and slaves were much rarer than men and their female slaves. These relationships happen because these women couldn’t suppress their sexuality while their husbands were away. Since their sexuality wasn’t entirely repressed, “the dangers of having sexual relations with a black man rather than a white man were enormous in terms of the possibility of producing a mixed-race child” (Anon, 2013, p. 1). Yet, some managed to escape this danger through using condoms made out of animal skin or other contraceptive methods (Caron, 2008, p. 16) while others who were caught pregnant with a mixed-race child were humiliated. They were imprisoned in their homes until the child is born and then sold into slavery (Hodes, 1997, pp. 136-137). Fearing social stigma and desiring to preserve their reputation, these elite women would sometime resort to “accuse the slave of rape” (Hodes, 1997, p. 135). These accusations could be used for a number of reasons. It could shift the focus and guilt from the woman to the one who is enslaved. It might also be used to cover up or justify any sexual encounters that happened as a result of exploitation, compulsion, or consent that was not allowed to be publicly acknowledged owing to social conventions. The severe power imbalance that resulted from the institution of slavery gave rise to these false charges. For the enslaved people implicated, the charges had dire repercussions; they frequently resulted in cruel punishment or even death. In a highly stratified and unequal society, this approach emphasizes the ways in which race, class, and gender intertwined to shape the lives of privileged women as well as those who were enslaved.

## II. DISCUSSION

Being an African-American writer, Williams is aware of the hierarchy in which “the white male occupies the highest rung on the ladder of power” in Antebellum South while the black slave is considered inferior to his master (Beaulieu, 1999, p. 31). In *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative*, Beaulieu (1999) believes that “Williams affects a series of reversals that insert blacks into position of power, thereby questioning America’s racial hierarchy” (p. 31). One of these reversals, we argue, arises from William’s portrayal of an often overlooked scenario: the physical abuse and exploitation of black male slaves by their white mistresses. What becomes palpable in *Dessa Rose* is the attempts to portray the harsh reality of the Old South’s slave system while also unveiling the covertly yet actual relationships between white southern belles and their black male slaves. Additionally, one of the factors that compels Williams to write *Dessa Rose* and serves as an inspiration for her portrayal of slave rebellion from a female perspective is “the bluntly sexist aspects of Styron’s *Nat Turner*- its only female characters of any substance are white women lusted after by black men” which deeply offended Williams (Inscocoe, 1989, p. 423). Subsequently, Williams challenges the stereotype of black men's

attraction for white women—a stereotype that Styron had perpetuated—by disclosing a forbidden sexual encounter that was initiated by the white southern mistress and her slave. Inscoc (1989) points out that,

through interaction of black and white, male and female, in various combinations throughout her novel, [Williams] demonstrates the moral ambiguities and inconsistencies in all of her characters. Both her masters and slaves are capable of injustices-violence, and cruelty, and the white women, as well as black, are subject to various forms of victimization by men, black and white. (p. 423)

Although Inscoc's reading of the novel denotes the moral ambiguities and inconsistencies within William's characters, black and white, along with the multifaceted human nature where both masters and slaves exhibit the capacity for injustice, violence, and cruelty, this argument may seem an overly deterministic view of the characters' fates. Some readers may contend that it is important to acknowledge the agency and the moments of strengths of these characters adopt instead of focusing on their vulnerability.

As depicted in most of slave narratives, the act of the master physically whipping and transgressing the bodies of his male and female slaves is evoked in this novel too. However, this narrative captures the resilience, resistance, and courage of the victims as they strive to rebel against the institution of slavery. One of Dessa's agencies, in addition to her role in leading an insurgency and resulted in killing five white men, is described by Adam Nehemiah, a white journalist writing about slave rebellion, as having a piercing intense gaze, which he refers to as "the darky's 'devil eyes her devil's stare'" (Williams, 1999, p. 20). Yet, the most controversial act of agency is Nathan's "serious business" of making love to white women, as he tells Ruth Sutton, a farm owner who harbors fugitive slaves (Williams, 1999, p. 152). Nathan's revelation leaves Ruth in a state of shock and sardonic disbelief. He boldly asserts, "'I make love,' he said grandly, 'not babies.' He shrugged. 'Other peoples makes carriages and clothes. White mens makes labor and'- he cut his eyes at her-'lust. Why can't I make love to a'-he coughed-'a lady?'" (Williams, 1999, p. 152). Nathan's inquiry delves into the concept of equality, ability, and freedom. His question to Ruth, whether he can offer love to a white woman just as the white master can engage in romantic relationships with both white and black women, becomes central to the novel's themes of equity and autonomy. This question highlights that if the white master can harm Kaine, Dessa can retaliate against the white master; if the master can assert control over his slave's body, then the male slave can be intimate with the white mistress as well.

Although the institution of slavery subjected enslaved individuals to various forms of exploitation and control, including their bodies, Nathan's inquiry touches on the idea that even in intimate matters, the agency and autonomy of enslaved people need not be denied or constrained by the white master's power and control. This refutes the notion that oppressed people become victims to those in power as well as to feelings of inferiority if they are unable to achieve such power. As a result, they may become uncontrollably attached to the 'Other', someone who is different from them in terms of gender and race, and express their need for power through unrestrained sexuality. As a slave and later as a fugitive, Nathan finds himself in a perilous situation where he lacks political power which is based on financial resources and freedom, both of which Nathan does not possess. Given the paucity of studies on male slaves who actively pursued power from white mistresses, we argue that Williams's exploration of these power dynamics, portrayed directly or indirectly in the relationship between Nathan and his owner Miz Lorraine and later with Ruth, illuminates aspects that historians and academics have either overlooked or otherwise deemed insignificant. The exploitation of the black male body by the Elite white mistress reveals a complex power dynamic that does not necessarily confer power on the enslaved individual. Accounts from Anon (2013) and Jones-Rogers (2019) emphasize that, in spite of any sense of autonomy, the black male slave is still a passive object, with the master or mistress still having sexual and political authority over him. Nathan, however, knows he has to navigate these power dynamics, wittingly or unwittingly, facing the risk of sexual violence from white women and the physical torture of white men which will help him reshape his autonomous personality.

The sexual scenario that Williams describes in her novel between Nathan and Miz Lorraine, his mistress, highlights a severe power imbalance where Nathan was systematically passive and denied autonomy. Miz Lorraine forces her young slaves, like Nathan the fifteen-year-old slave, to become her "bedmates." She makes sure that "they learned some more conventional trade, and, about the time their fear of discovery and their awe of her abated...she got rid of them, sold them off" (Williams, 1999, p. 156). Common to the masters' female slave bedmates, Nathan, "Terrified," has not the right or effort to resist the commands of his mistress (Williams, 1999, p. 156). Williams, in this sense, not only refutes the "myth of the black male rapist" but also the stereotypical image of white female purity (Hooks, 2014, p. 60). An ambiguous feeling of fear and ecstasy, "faintly repelled but already excited," puts Nathan in a realm of unconsciousness (Williams, 1999, p. 156). He becomes oblivious of the causes of this victimization yet he engages in it because he has no choice. His consent suggests that he prefers this form of oppression as alternative to the whips of his master. Apparently, sexual victimization to Nathan does not give him pain as the physical victimization does. The former projects his loss of power and inferiority but with ecstatic feeling while the latter leaves harmful feelings and painful scars over his soul and flesh alike. The ecstatic feeling brings into attention Bensedik's (2020) claim that,

Nathan reminds Dessa Rose's readers of Frantz Fanon's obsession with the White body when he says 'I marry the culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.'(22)

When Miz Lorraine threatens that "if you [Nathan] ever breathe a word of this to anybody, I'll chop it off," Nathan believes her (Williams, 1999, p. 156). Paradoxically, this threat provides Nathan with a limited sense of agency and

autonomy within the constraints of the system concealed through secrecy. This threat, according to Williams, “didn’t deflate him; rather the knowledge that he lay in danger, not only of his member but of his life, sent him plunging up a peak of unspeakable desire” (Williams, 1999, p. 156). Gilman (1985), in his study to decipher the iconography of female sexuality of the late nineteenth-century, argues that the primitive’s, referring to the black, “loss of control was marked by the regression into this dark past—a degeneracy into the primitive expression of emotions in the form of either madness or unrestrained sexuality” (pp. 229-230). Unlike female slaves who resist and rebel their masters’ rape attempts, Nathan, passively, responds to his mistress’s fulfillments and enters a realm of oblivion. Miz Lorraine’s sexual and political power is transferred into a burden and a fear of loss of control over the “other” too. At this point the male slave’s loss of control equals the upper race’s loss of control. Hodes (1997) states that “in the antebellum South, sexual liaisons between white women and black men threatened the institution of racial slavery in a way that sex between white men and black women did not” (p. 402). The fact that Miz Lorraine is threatening Nathan because of her secretive sexual orientation puts her reputation as a respectable, devout Southern gentlewoman in jeopardy. Additionally, it has an impact on Nathan’s life as well. As a result, both must keep this act secret in order to maintain their own needs and desires, making them equal in this regard.

In contrast, Nathan and Ruth’s relationship differs from the one between Nathan and Miz Lorraine; it serves as an emancipation of the conventional synthesis of the white institution, ultimately contributing to the downfall of antebellum South, and agrees with Jones-Rogers claim that white women were engaged in slavery rather than the wildly held belief that they were passively managing antebellum homes. Ruth is left with two children after her husband—who referred to as a “scoundrel, wastrel, gambler” (Williams, 1999, p. 109)—continuously travels out of town for months, claiming to running business and collecting money. After getting married, Bertie secludes Ruth away from her friends, neighbors, and relatives. When Bertie never returns because of his bad economical reputation, Ruth’s family has refused to help her or accept her in the family again. Poor white women in the South were aware of “what improvements in their lives they hoped to effect, and which other members of southern society could help or hinder them.” They also pursued their own “self-interest” (Arroyo, 1996, p. 58). Arroyo’s statement can be connected to Ruth’s situation in *Dessa Rose*. Nothing is left for Ruth except the slave fugitives she harbors, her children and her husband’s unprofitable plantation. Ruth is likely aware of the limitations and challenges she faces in improving her own circumstances. Although the runaway “darkies seem to work with a better will than darkies on the place had ever done,” Ruth lives with constant fear of being caught for sheltering those slaves (Williams, 1999, p. 111). However, to honor the memory of her departed Mammy, Ruth welcomes those runaway slaves, breastfeeds Dessa’s baby, and embraces them as her family and a source of comfort and diversion. The romantic relationship that develops between Ruth and Nathan serves to further deepens this relationship between the runaway slaves and the white mistress.

The black community, at the beginning, have had their own reservations to Ruth and Nathan’s relationship. Male slaves tend to accept this relationship as long as such liaison remains concealed while the fear of discovery and retribution from the white community weighed heavily on the female slaves. Both male and female slaves eagerly desire their freedom, but female slave mothers, like Dessa, are more determined to shield their child from the horrors of slavery. Dessa, naming Ruth as “Miz Ruint”, serves as a powerful symbol of Dessa’s conviction that the relationship between Ruth and Nathan will lead to the slaves’ destruction in the plantation. Bensedik notes that “Ruth is nevertheless viewed as ‘loose, immoral, and oversexed’ as Black women were generally seen in the antebellum” (Williams, 1999, p. 22). Williams’s reversal of the conventional image that perceives southern white women as pure and chaste serves to reverse the power dynamics and reshapes America’s history afterwards. This is manifested in Dessa’s later approval of this white mistress black slave relationship. She notes,

A slave loving with the mistress, the master’s wife, might be enough to give a white man the stroke [...] I could see my old master’s face turning red—might even go purple—as the sight of that fly in his milk and death hit him all at once. Course his eyes would pop. Mine had. But I wasn’t in no mood to laugh; Master might get red, but if Master lived, the slave was dead. Nathan could die tomorrow cause of this mess. I was mad at him for letting that woman put him in such a risk and I was mad at her for doing it. (Williams, 1999, p. 168)

Dessa feels a tumultuous of mixed emotions, oscillating between dread and happiness. The potential demise of the dream that all slaves fervently desired is the source of her terror. However, she hopes that this relationship will act as a form of retribution against the white masters, who would be upset if their wives were involved in similar acts. Dessa’s views resonates with Williams’s commitment to defend the community that she is part of. By breaking barriers, challenging established hierarchies, and fostering a counterpart solid community, they become the nightmare of the ones who hold the status quo. Williams, in this sense, provides her characters of an opportunity to redefine the canons preserved for decades under conventional standards.

Extensive historical research supports the notion that the white master held significant power within the plantation system, both economically and socially. Nevertheless, the downfall of the antebellum South, in *Dessa Rose*, is symbolized in the absence of the white master at Sutton Glen. “Post-pastoral” is how Harrison (1994) characterizes the living conditions in Sutton Glen. She contends that the absence of the white master jeopardizes the patriarchal system’s viability and allows new kinds of plantation communities to flourish. The interracial connection between Nathan and Ruth serves to reinforce the no-race society that is constructed in Sutton Glen, which undermines all preexisting conventions. In Sutton Glen, a significant transformation occurs as the formerly enslaved individuals are no longer labeled as slaves. They act

with a newfound of freedom and willingly help Ruth while awaiting the opportunity to embark their journey to the west. Conversely, Nathan emerges as a prominent figure and assumes a leadership role within this society based on his relationship with Ruth. This dynamic, in some respects, mirrors traditional gender role, where men often make the first move, while women are expected to maintain a more reserved and demure demeanor. Nathan is seen walking into Ruth's bedroom without knocking and speaking to Ruth "with such authority" asking her to take of her clothes. Ruth, "almost without thought," consents to his request (Williams, 1999, p. 167), underscoring the reversed power dynamics at play in their relationship. In addition, this consensual relationship between two powerless persons serves as a mechanism for unity and empowerment, enabling them to exert a degree of autonomy over their lives. In the context of the newly established social order in Sutton Glen, the white mistress and the black slave find themselves in a relatively similar position, both equal in this status quo. Consequently, it is crucial to view this relationship not as an anomaly, but as an act of resistance against prevailing social norms.

The relationship between Ruth and Nathan exemplifies a unique form of resistance that arises from their mutual benefit and trust, transcending traditional boundaries and societal expectations. Scott (1970) describes how some white women have shown extraordinary skill in buying and selling slaves, operating farms, and overseeing a significant number of Black slaves—even when their husbands were not around. Scott notes that many of these women were extremely skillful and successful in the South, owning land and starting successful plantations on their own. On the other hand, "not all white women possessed the economic capacity or desire to enslave Black people," yet this doesn't mean that because poor white women did not own slaves, they were more intimately associated with abolitionists (Godwin, 2021, p. 1). Based on these two contradictory portrayals, the reader may perceive how Williams, masterfully, creates a multi-dimensional character that of Ruth who embodies the contradictions and complexities of her era and challenges the conventional narratives of her time through her relationship with Nathan. Her actions and choices are not easily classified, reflecting the blurred lines between privilege and poverty, compassion and self-interest, and defiance of societal norms and conformity. Ruth, who is in serious financial trouble is attempted to participate in the plan devised by Nathan to raise the necessary funds to enable the farm's slaves to escape. The scheme calls for Ruth to sell the runaway slaves back into slavery, after which they will all flee, gather at a designated meeting place, and relocate to a new area where Ruth will do the same. Ruth's actions reflect the strategic navigation of her role as a white female slave owner, as observed in Scott's work and paralleled in the accounts of other Southern white women presented by Jones-Rogers. She, nevertheless, wittingly, manages to fool those of her own class. Outwardly, she presents herself as a slave trader while covertly she engages in Nathan's plan for both financial gain and the noble purpose of assisting enslaved individuals in their pursuit of freedom. This intricate web of relationships, motivations, and contradictions within the narrative underscores the complexity and defiance of societal norms that both Ruth and Nathan embody, ultimately revealing how both characters empower each other. Their relationship highlights the evolving power dynamics and the potential for unity and collaboration, transcending the racial divisions of the past.

### III. CONCLUSION

The depiction of the white mistress, black slave forced or romantic relationships in the novel serves as a significant lens through which to examine the flaws of the antebellum South. In this context, whiteness functions as a signifier set against the signified black, illustrating the contrast between racial identities. It also showcases the desire of the signified, representing the oppressed, to transcend these divisions and achieve a sense of sameness and equality. However, it becomes evident that the interracial relationship may ultimately lead to the seamless integration of the two cultures or the establishment of harmony. It provides an opportunity for the "other" to gain a deeper understanding of the oppressed culture and to acknowledge the oppressed individual's longing for a happy life on equal terms, akin to that of the dominant culture. This dynamic reveals the complex power structures and cultural exchanges at play within the narrative, foreshadowing the downfall of racial and cultural conventional dynamics in the antebellum South.

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