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## Study of Struggle for Self-Definition in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*

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### **Abstract:**

*Sherley Anne Williams was an emerging prolific African American writer. She was a poet, novelist, professor and social critic who emerged on the post-Civil Rights movement literary scene. The Peacock Poems, her first collection of poetry nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. She published her powerful and promising novel Dessa Rose in 1986. Dessa Rose was a novel about slavery which explores the complex relationships between the blacks and the whites. Williams used two historical source materials for this novel. One historical incident was about a pregnant slave woman who revolts against slave traders in 1829, and second was about a white woman who saved runaway slaves in 1830. The novel combined the two stories and explored the meeting and struggle for self-definition of two women. It tells the story of a main protagonist of the novel, Dessa Rose. She was a black woman who had sentenced to death and Ruth Elizabeth Sutton, was white plantation owner, who had been abandoned by her husband. Dessa and Ruth faced with serious difficulties and obstacles and tried to overcome by cooperating with one another. Dessa Rose was highly focused the struggle for self-definition rather than the plight of the slaves.*

**Keywords:** Sherley Anne Williams, African American literature, self-definition, slavery

### **1. Introduction**

Sherley Anne Williams was a prominent African American author. The present research paper was a study of the struggle for self-definition in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*. She was an author of several works for children. Sherley Anne Williams was born at Bakersfield, California on August 25, 1944. Her mother Lena and the father Jessee Winston Williams was farm laborers in the San Joaquin Valley. She was the third of four daughters. Her family picked cotton for earning their living. At the age of eight, her father died of tuberculosis when she was seven, and her mother died when she was sixteen. She graduated in 1966 from California State University at Fresno. In 1972, she got her master's degree from Brown University. She began her writing in 1966. With her writing, she became the first African American literature professor in 1973 at the University of California at San Diego.

Her writing career was very impressive. Among the short stories and the poetry collections, she published her first novel, *Dessa Rose*, in 1986. This novel describes the relationship between a pregnant young slave woman, Dessa and a white woman, Ruth, who has been abandoned by her slave owner husband in Alabama. It's based on two true historical incidents. First was a pregnant black woman who helps lead a slave revolt in 1829, and the second was a white woman living on a farm in North Carolina in 1830 who saved the runaway slaves. Williams had nominated for some works. *The Peacock Poems* nominated for a Pulitzer and a National book Award nomination. She had received several awards and honors for her work as both a writer and professor. She died on 6 July, 1999.

### **2. Concept of Self-Definition**

The self-definition was a related to the person's identification of self. With the knowing more about self-definition, a person was very clear about his life. He understood his aim to live his life. It was very much important that every person must think about own self-definition and live happily and purposefully.

#### *2.1. Self*

"A person's essential being that distinguishes them from others, especially considered as the object of introspection or reflexive action."<sup>1</sup>

The 'self' was a person's own experience about his perception, emotions, thoughts and feelings.

<sup>1</sup> "self." The Free On-line Dictionary of Computing. Denis Howe, Retrieved on 17 Apr. 2015.

## 2.2. Self-Definition

1. Self-definition is being able to know who you are and what your purpose is in life. An example of self-definition is when you know you are a strong, capable, confident teacher and husband.<sup>2</sup>
2. The understanding or determination of one's own nature or basic qualities.<sup>3</sup>
3. The definition of one's identity, character, abilities, and attitudes by oneself.<sup>4</sup>

The self-definition provides the definition for itself in a positive way. Through this identification of self, we can create our future. We can erase the bad things in our life and nurture our life with the good things.

## 3. Struggle for Self-Definition in Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*

*Dessa Rose* was a great and extraordinary first novel by Sherley Anne Williams. *Dessa Rose* was a story of Odessa Rose, a young black slave, the main protagonist of the novel. She attacked her master as she killed her lover. After this incident, she was beaten and sold away. At the time of transport, she and several other savages revolt and escape from there. Dessa captured while attempting the attack on a white man. She sentenced to hang but she was pregnant. So, she will first give birth to a child, then she will execute. Before the giving birth, the child she rescued by three men and brings to a small plantation in Sutton managed by Ruth Elizabeth. Ruth was a white woman who abandoned by her husband. He was gone on business work few years ago and never returned. He was a slave master. Ruth was rescued the runaway slaves and run her plantation for them. Once all slaves and Ruth made a plan to get money. The slave was ready to do for free themselves. The plan was Ruth sell the slaves at day and collects the money. Then at night the slaves fled from there. When the one slave was collecting the enough money, he will flee west.

Williams created a black superwoman who realized her strength, gives voice to her stories and creates an alternative, independent, black communities as havens in a hostile world. Williams was an African - American Southern woman writer who portrays black women from the inside, exploring the pain and her struggle and examines the path of self-development for her self-definition. *Dessa Rose* wrote in slave narrative style. It's divided into three sections, The Darky, The Wench and The Negress. Each section reflected a phase that Dessa Rose was going through. Williams greatly illustrated the in-depth depiction of the major characters.

Although the novel related to the major theme of slavery, Williams highly focused on the struggle of Dessa Rose for self-definition. Dessa as a black woman and a mother struggled a lot in her life. Dessa rescued before hanging and brought to Ruth's plantation. At a farm instead of security, she was confused by surrounding environment and weakened by the birth of her child. Ruth Elizabeth was a second character in this novel who also struggle for her self-definition. Ruth was very whimsical but a strong character that cannot refuse a runaway slave a home. She was an alone white woman who was struggling for survival on an isolated North Carolina farm. She and an old slave woman, Mammy, was has organized an underground community of runaways. Ruth was also weak because she knew that her dashing groom was a riverboat gambler. She had also abandoned by her family because of her husband's reality and Mammy. Mammy also died and left Ruth alone. Ruth was alone and not decided what to do in her life. She faced financial problems to run slave community. She was confused in her life.

The heart of the novel was the growth of a relationship between Dessa and the Ruth. These two women meet at a very crucial time. It was a stressful period for both. Dessa and Ruth's relationship was very complicated. The white and black was coming together and love each other, cooperated with each other was very exceptional. It was an ideal relationship that gave message throughout the world for being unite. Though the white woman, Ruth takes care Dessa and her child. Ruth nurses Dessa's baby as she rests. Both women are struggling to establish own identity. They were a struggle for surviving in the crucial environment.

In the process of struggle for self-definition Dessa and Ruth increase their understanding and decrease their racial prejudices and preconceptions. The first part of the novel explored the struggle of Dessa. As a slave, she faces the racial problem. As a pregnant woman, she worried about the future of her child. She was not stable in her life. She was thinking about her emotions, thoughts, and feelings, and this was the beginning of her struggle for self-definition. The second part of the novel reveals the struggle of Ruth. Though she was white, she struggled for survival. As a realization of her husband's reality, she became deserted. Her beloved Mammy also died and left her alone. In her life, she did not know what to do with herself. She rescued runaway slaves for helping her in a plantation. It was not her real motivation for life. She continuously thought about that, and this was her journey to develop her struggle for self-definition.

In *Dessa Rose*, Dessa was attempting to define herself and tell her story in an opposition environment. The struggle for achieving control of her story was evident in the different themes in the novel. The major role played in the Dessa's self-definition was an Adam Nehemiah. He was a scholar and author. Dessa develops her self-definition by cleverly handling Adam Nehemiah. Nehemiah tried to redefine Dessa. He writes books on the Southern planter aristocracy. It was about the slavery and slave peoples who revolt against slavery. He wants to write a story on Dessa. Nehemiah was writing a book, *The Roots of Rebellion in the Slave Populations and the Means of Eradicating Them* in which he redefines Dessa. Nehemiah was not writing the Dessa's story. He used Dessa's story as his own and published it. Nehemiah thought that after publishing this book all slave owners and southern whites will be frightened. They

<sup>2</sup> YourDictionary definition and usage example, LoveToKnow Corp., Retrieved on 17 Apr. 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Webster's New World College Dictionary, Wiley Publishing, Cleveland, Ohio, Retrieved on 17 Apr. 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 5th edition Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, Retrieved on 17 Apr. 2015.

would buy his book so he will be famous and will get success. He said about Dessa, "Pray God this darky don't die before I get my book!"(27).

In this novel, he always addressed Dessa with different names like; 'darky'(232), 'a dangerous criminal'(220), 'Girl' (45) and 'Odessa'. Dessa was disliked by him for misnaming her and said, "Why he don't even know my name ... talking about Odessa" (225). Dessa was helpless, and she had to tell her story. She had no choice. Nehemiah also trapped her in the racial stereotype. He wanted to control over her. When he learned that she attacked her master, he wrote about her, "Truly, the female of this species as deadly as the male" (39).

Nehemiah thought that he had understood Dessa but not. He thought that she was terrible, but Dessa declined all his perception. She also neglected his attempt of renaming and redefining her. She now comes to know that what he wants and what she would tell. She cleverly handled him. She talked around the subject and described her life very differently. This attempt of her was hiding her story instead of exploring. She struggled for keeping her story secret during the interview. Nehemiah was not succeeding to reveal the Dessa's story because he didn't know about her culture. Dessa told about her lover Kaine, but Nehemiah was not interested in this part of her story and even did not keep a record of this part. At the end of the interview, he realized that he failed to explore Dessa. Dessa succeeds to a control of her voice and story. She now decided to write her own story. She struggled a lot for self-definition at a time of interaction with Nehemiah. In the final section of a novel, Dessa retold her story among the familiar slaves. She secured her place in her story. She defined herself as a free woman. She said in the epilogue:

"I hopes I live for my people like they do for me, so sharp, sometimes I can't believe it's all in my mind. And my mind wanders. This why I have it wrote down, why I has the child say it back. I never will forget [Nehemiah] trying to read me, knowing I had put myself in his hands. Well, this, the children have heard from our lips. I hope they never have to pay what it cost us to own ourselves." (259-60)

Through the Dessa's struggle for self-definition, Williams represents those women who also struggled with their life. Dessa completed her self-representation and defined herself in her own words. Williams was used language and dialogue very aptly throughout the novel that reflects the social environment and the struggles of the characters. All characters are well defined. Dessa was an inspirational character. The structure of the book was interesting as well as effective.

#### 4. Conclusion

Sherley Anne Williams wrote and interestingly weaved this powerful story into an easily understood. Williams explored Dessa and Ruth's struggle for self-definition in this novel. Through their struggle, Williams draws the harsh realities of life. Many people in our society were living without any motivation and aim. They did not define the self. They did not know what to do in life. Williams had a brilliant picaresque view that reflected in this novel through her characters. Self-definition achievement was characterized by a clear, confident acceptance of oneself. A person often allows the acceptance of their self plays an important role in their life. It always leads to an increase in self-confidence, positive psychological adjustment and decreases the negative perceptions. It was artistically brilliant and emotionally affecting novel that enlighten the other black women to redefine themselves.

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