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THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN
SHERLEY ANNE WILLIAMS' *DESSA ROSE*

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ABSTRACT

Cultural study is not really a discrete approach, but rather a set of practices. These the cultural practices also providing a way for hybridization among different racial groups in this world. Hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. The cultural hybridity of a society also evolves conflicts and contradictions, cultural diversity and cultural differences, objectivity and subjectivity, and so on. This research article on "The Politics of Cultural Hybridity in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*" also explores the vivid picture of the hybrid culture, life and struggles of the African American slaves in the bicultural American society. Therefore, this article proves that, all the African American slaves should be treated equally with the white authority to the level of centre from that of marginalized position. Key words: The African American slaves, the white authority, cultural diversity and difference, hybridity, struggles, and so on.

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Culture is a critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled. Stuart Hall argued that culture can only be a site of ongoing struggle that can never be guaranteed for one side or the others, and this culture is never reducible to politics. This cultural practices and forms of representation have the black subject at their centre and put the issue of cultural identity in question. The recent theories of enunciation suggested that, though the person speaks, in his own name, and from his own experience, the person who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place. Cultural identity is not as transparent or unproblematic one, which is never complete, always in process, and constituted within, not outside representation.

According to Stuart Hall, there are two important positions in cultural identity. In the first position 'cultural identity' is defined in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves' which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. The second position of cultural identity recognized the points of similarity which constitute 'what we really are' or 'what we have become'. People cannot speak with any exactness, about any kind of experience and identity, without acknowledging its ruptures and discontinuities that constitute, in the life of

African American's culture. Cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belonged to the future as much as to the past. It belonged somewhere from history, so it undergone constant transformation. This second position also described, how the black people, black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation. The colonizers have the power to make them to see and experience themselves as 'Other'. This idea of otherness as an inner compulsion changed the conception of 'Cultural identity'. Therefore, this research article on "Cultural Hybridity in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*" explores the vivid picture of the life and struggles of the African American slaves in the bicultural American society.

Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* is a fictional slave narrative, and the story of a strong black woman committed to fight until she and those whom she loved. The narrative structure of *Dessa Rose* demonstrated the theme of Dessa's struggle for self-definition. This novel is divided into three parts, with a prologue and an epilogue. Part I, 'The Darky', is dominated by Adam Nehemiah's attempts to discover Dessa's story and appropriate it for his own purposes. In part II, 'The Wench', the narrative focus shifted between Dessa and Ruth, reflecting the tension of their relationship. In part III, 'The Negress', the narrative voice for the first time is Dessa's own, as she took command of her own life.

Dessa Rose has the black subject at its centre. Dessa Rose is a black girl who was under the white authority and also murdered her white master. In this novel Anne Williams dealt the issue of cultural identity or hybridity in question. Dessa spoke from her own experience of hybridity. *Dessa Rose* also examined its enunciation of the transformation of the 'Other' into a 'self'. This novel examined not only Dessa Rose's personal experience of cultural hybridity but also the experience of her own community. Dessa Rose reflected Hall's view of the African American's cultural hybridity and identity which is always in process of its inner experience, but never gets completed. Dessa Rose also featured the African American women's struggle for agency in the face of racial, sexual, and economic oppression. The text explored tensions between slavery and freedom, orality and literacy, fact and fiction, women and men, whites and blacks. It also affirmed the cultural values of unity, co-operation and community that Sherley Anne Williams considered such an important part of the African American history.

Part of Anne Williams' strategy in *Dessa Rose* is to demonstrate the forms of delusion operative in a slave system nominally structured along familial terms. In particular, she negotiated the tension between the two major forms of fictive kin ties between 'adoptive' kinship and 'quasi-filial' kinship, in order to demonstrate their differences and to suggest something about their shared ideas of oppression. Ashraf Rushdy wrote Orlando Patterson's statement about difference between the two fictive kinship systems as, that in "adoptive" kinship the slave was welcomed into the slave community with the intent of "genuine assimilation" and is given "all the claims, privileges, powers and obligations of the status he or she has been ascribed" (Rushdy 63), whereas in "quasi-filial" kinship the slave was welcomed only nominally and the "language of kinship" is used as a means of expressing, at the same time hiding, "an authority relation between master and slave" (Rushdy 63). While Anne Williams shown that at the end Rufel's relationship with Dorcas was modeled on 'adoptive kinship', she took pains to demonstrate the destructive processes at work in generating and maintaining that sense of adoption.

Dessa Rose reflected racism, 'being' as well as 'becoming', 'past' as well as 'future', otherness and traumatic colonial experience. In the beginning of the novel, Dessa Rose was imprisoned in a Sheriff's cellar. She also had been sentenced to death for participating in a revolt on a slave coffle that killed five white men and maimed the trader Wilson, but her execution had been delayed pending the birth of her child. But the reason remained her love with Kaine. Kaine was murdered by his white master. This scene reflected the opposition between white capitalism and black slaves. As Dessa answered Nehemiah: "I kill white mens cause the same reason Masa kill Kaine. Cause I can" (Williams 23). Dessa's attachment to Kaine made Dessa to murder her master. This strength of Dessa made other niggers rebel against the white authority. When Dessa was interviewed by Adam Nehemiah, her indirect answers thwart his efforts to uncover details of the revolt. A sketchy outline of her history emerged, however, and readers learn of Dessa's harsh life on a plantation, her attack on the plantation's mistress, her subsequent beating and sale to Wilson, the revolt, and her escape,

recapture, and trial. Adam Nehemiah was outraged when Dessa escaped again with the help of Nathan, Cully, Harker, and the Sheriff's slaves. Therefore Dessa became 'friend', and 'devil woman' to the eyes of Nehemiah and other people of sheriff.

This life of Dessa reflected two real antebellum events: the revolt of a slave coffle, ferociously stimulated by a pregnant black captive, and a report of a Southern white woman who defied social dictum and dared to safeguard fugitive slaves. But this real incident was slightly changed in this novel as, the coffle of a black pregnant woman Dessa Rose with other niggers. Dessa struggled to resist the slavery and strived to develop her community among the white authority. Confined to a root cellar for the duration of her pregnancy, Dessa was an object of notoriety and fascination to both the whites and the blacks. According to Adam Nehemiah, this drooping 'darky' was the savage centerpiece of his forthcoming volume on slave rebellion, and she saw her as the engine to propel him into the elite inner conception of slave holding gentry. Dessa glimpsed as the proud 'devil women', a votive of African authority whose fearlessness and self-determination they discreetly emulated. These differences in perceptions of Dessa highlighted both a white culture of domination, one that misapprehended the docility and surrogacy of the slaves, and a slave culture that instigated gestures and meanings in defiance of oppression.

Several of Dessa's comrades from the coffle returned to rescue her. They deposit her in the safety of Sutton's Glen, a backwoods farm owned by Rufel, who turned blind eyes to the fugitives flocking there for refuge. Tucked among the cotton fields, slave and mistress cultivated animosity. For example, when Harker, a former cofflemate, broaches an idea for gaining freedom that must involve Rufel, Dessa initially rejected the plan. She balked at owing the liberty of herself and her little boy to a white woman. According to Dessa, Rufel epitomized every infliction and indecency that whites heap upon slaves: their arrogance, inhumanity, hypocrisy, and greed; their disloyalty and capriciousness; their self-elected mastery of another race.

Harker's plan, however, was too crucial for Dessa to dismiss. From town to town, Rufel exhibited a wagonload of the Glen's most valuable slaves. With Dessa as mammy and nursemaid, Rufel sold the slaves, only to have them escape their captors and rejoin the group at some predesignated rendezvous. The scheme nearly unraveled when Adam Nehemiah recognized Dessa and persuaded the local sheriff to confiscate her. Playing flustered lady and flabbergasted maid to the hilt, Rufel and Dessa discredited Nemi and secure her release. Black people faced some economic problems to get their freedom. This economic problems reflected in the words of Harker, when Dessa suggested him to go to North, "I want to go West cause I knows for a fact it's no slavery there. A black man told me that he been there, come back from there. Slave catchers, neither patterrollers troubles no one there. But whichever way we goes, Dessa, going to take money" (Williams 296).

In the last part of the novel it is identical to see how Nathan and Miz Lady differentiated low class white folks from high class white people and black people from all other white people. As Nathan said, "the white folks mostly didn't mean nothing by all they carrying on and the black folks mostly didn't take it too much to heart". Miz Lady said, "only the most low-class white folks acted so harsh; most masters treated their slaves like they would other servants" (Williams 338). This is what made black people feel themselves as Others and made them to prove their community as also a race. In one way Dessa also felt herself as 'Other' when she slept in the bed of Miss Rufel.

The boundaries of difference are continually repositioned in relation to different points of reference. Similarly in the developed West, the people are very much 'the same' belong to the marginal, the underdeveloped, the periphery, the 'Other' and at the outer edge and at the 'rim', of the metropolitan world. At the same time the relation of the 'Otherness' to the metropolitan centre is not a standard one. Each has negotiated its economic, political and cultural dependency differently. And this 'difference' whether they like it or not, is already inscribed in their culturally hybridized life. Dessa Rose tried to get relief from 'Otherness' because of its standardlessness. The African American community is planned to escape from their political and economic control and condition differently. But this difference is inscribed in their mind.

According to Jacques Derrida 'difference' is a marker which sets up a disturbance in the settled understanding or translation of the world concept. It sets the word in motion to new meanings without erasing the trace of its other meanings. It is possible with this conception of 'difference', to rethink the positionings

and repositioning of, the African American cultural hybridity in relation to at least two 'presences' of Presence Africaine and Presence Americaine.

Ultimately, slaveholders are bestialized by their system of bondage. While the slaves communities privileged industry and respect of authority, in the white communities. So-called good masters discourage religion among enslaved populations, and the fields and kitchens swelled with the light-skinned faces of their bastard children. Supposedly stern sheriffs are shamelessly seduced by the winks of wicked women. Finally as even the slaves sardonically recognize, the language of the masters is often worse than that of their supposed inferiors. This is what the difference which Dessa Rose and her community often recognized in their life. The mistress' complicity in enslavement is also scrutinized in the novel. Rufel, for example, suspected that Bertie had beaten slaves, but she hesitated to confront him. Her powers are compromised by her complete legal and social subordination to her husband. Her family may be the source of her husband's wealth, and she may take charge of the farming while her absent spouse frequents steamboats, casinos, and whorehouses. Nevertheless, just as the slave must obey the slaveholder without question, so too, must the mistress utterly submit her will to the master's prerogative. For the mistress and the mammy, rape and the fear of rape suppress women powers and stamp them in their limited place especially Rufel is seduced by Nathan and also tried by a white man. So she thought this is an unchanged one, not only for the black women but also for the white women.

Therefore the difference is identical at the end of the novel. There was only one African American slave in Dessa Rose and that is Dorcas. Dessa, Harker, Nathan, Ada and fugitives. Anne Williams placed only one voice of Dessa beyond the realm of freedom and, coincidentally, represented only that voice of other slaves are always a reconstruction of someone else's imagining. The most astonishing accomplishment is the implicit representation of the proper respect, due to the enigma and the ambiguity of the slave's voice. The fact which ensured, one can never directly hear Dorcas's voice or immediately encounter the words except through others' representations suggests something about the limitations on the ability to hear the slave voice.

The presence of Africaine was the site of the repressed. They were silenced because of the memory by the power of the experience of slavery. In fact Africa is present everywhere: in the everyday life and customs of the slave quarters, in the language and patios of the plantations, in names and words, often disconnected from their taxonomies. In the first part of *Dessa Rose*, Anne Williams dealt with primary generic myth for the Afro-American's interrelated quest for freedom and literacy. In this cultural drama, the written word represented the processes used by the racist white American institutions to proscribe the African American subjectivity. In the nineteenth century slave narratives, writing came to represent primarily racist institutions against which the slave gained his or her subjectivity by assuming control over his or her voice.

The first part of *Dessa Rose*, then, is about the tension between an oppressive literacy and an emancipatory orality, clearly belonged to a topical tradition which one can have discerned in much recent black fiction. In the beginning of the novel Adam Nehemiah described the patios and language which was used by the black American through the voice of Dessa Rose. The orality of the first part expressed the everyday life of the Black American slaves. It also included how they struggle to have their relationship with each other. The second part of Anne Williams novel is also about "the struggle for discursive power", in which "the fictions take the form of quests for voice, for authority over the narration itself" (Rushdy 16). In this scenario, precisely as in the dramatic encounter between literacy and orality, the struggle is between one form of representation which historically has been used to generate and transmit the African American culture and another form of representation which has been employed to traduce and control that culture. The place of the 'Other', fixed in violence, hostility, aggression, and also in the ambivalence of its desire. The Presence Americaine continued to have its silences, its suppressions. It is the beginning of diversity, hybridity and difference.

'Racism and reaction' is that racism is culturally and historically specific rather than naturally occurring and universal. But, the White authority made the racial issue as a universal colouring. Where the term 'race' is usually associated with physical or biological differences in such things as skin and eye colour, 'ethnicity' described social or cultural differences that are not necessarily visible or grounded in nature. "The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity as

well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated and all knowledge contextual" (Procter 117). Therefore, it is this understanding of ethnicity that allowed Anne Williams in her *Dessa Rose* to offer a re-reading of a major category of difference-‘black’-not as a racial marker, a matter of pigmentation or skin colour, but as an historical and discursive ‘positioning’ that has shifted over history.

It also placed an emphasis on unity rather than difference, while reversing the oppositional logic of racism through the construction of an essentially the good black subject and the bad white subject. The construction of a hegemonic, or the unified black identity, formulated itself in terms of a critique of a way the blacks were positioned as the unspoken invisible “other” of predominantly white aesthetic and cultural discourses (Procter 117). Where a certain brand of post-modernism might emphasize the endless deferral of meaning as it moves from position to position, sentence to sentence, but it is crucial to remember that meaning is generated when it ‘stops’. This ‘full’ stop is never final or fixed, always arbitrary and contingent. This is why self-reflexivity, contingency and difference alone are not enough. “There has to be a politics of articulation” (Procter 121), a means of linking or bringing together individuals to form new alliances. Where in traditional identity politics such alliances were formed through an emphasis on unity and the suppression of difference. In this context, identity is not nomadic, endlessly wandering or deferred; on the contrary it recognizes that: every identity is placed, positioned, in a culture, a language, a history... It is its specificity, on conjuncture. But it is not necessarily armour-plated against other identities. It is not tied to fixed, permanent, unalterable oppositions. It is not wholly defined by exclusion. Therefore, the African American slaves such as *Dessa Rose* and other Sheriff’s slaves tried to prove themselves as a race, which should be placed in the centre of authoritative position, equal to that of the white imperialist authority from their marginalized position.

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