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Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose: An American Sisterhood in Black and White*

By Ahmed Nabil Bensedik¹

Abstract

In light of the theme of the 5th World Conference on Women's Studies 2019, 'Activism, Solidarity and Diversity: Feminist Movements Toward Global Sisterhood', this article contends that Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986) is an appeal for an American bond of sisterhood between feminists and womanists. In the process, it examines the relationship between the novel's two Black and White heroines, Dessa Rose and Ruth Sutton respectively, through the lens of Bonnie Thornton Dill's definition of sisterhood in her seminal work, *Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood*. While discomfort and distrust encircle their first encounter in the Sutton's Glen, equality, reciprocation, and trust adorn their sisterhood in their last encounter in jail. Such a sisterhood is the aftermath of both women's realization that they are both subjects to White men's patriarchy. Williams's use of both heroines as microcosms for Black and White women addresses the widening gap in the 1980s and today between feminists and womanists for an American sisterhood in black and white.

Keywords: *Dessa Rose*, Feminism, Womanism, American Sisterhood

Introduction

In her monograph, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), Alice Walker asserts that 'womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender'.² In other words, womanism brings color to feminism and is complementary to it. Unlike the latter, which was originally conceived by middle-class White women, the former includes women in general and Black women in particular. In comparing them to each other, Layli Phillips suggests that womanism and feminism are dissimilar to each other since 'Black women experience sexism, and womanism is concerned with sexism, feminism is confluent with the expression of womanism, but feminism and womanism cannot be conflated, nor can it be said that womanism is a "version" of feminism'. Womanism is nevertheless more inclusive in comparison to feminism thanks to its 'antioppressionist', 'vernacular', 'nonideological', 'communitarian', and 'spiritualized' traits. First, its antioppressionist nature reflects its earnest endeavors in sustaining 'the liberation of all humankind from all forms of oppression'. Second, its vernacularism dovetails it with the 'everyday people and everyday life'. Third, in being nonideological, it has an elastic nature as it both 'abhors rigid lines of demarcation and tends to function in a decentralized manner'. Fourth, it is communitarian in working for the greater good of all human beings, regardless of age, class, gender, physical ability, race, religion, or sexual preference. Fifth, the womanist spirituality takes the initiative in defending all living matter, not only human beings.³ Womanism, in this case, is

¹ A PhD student at the University of Buckingham.

² Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (London: The Women's Press, 1984), p. xii.

³ Layli Phillips, 'Introduction' in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. by Layli Phillips (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. xxiv-xxvi.

Black women's response to White feminists' marginalization of 'women of color, women of poorer socioeconomic status, immigrant women, and non-heterosexual women'.⁴

More to the point, womanism seems to be a viable option for Black women against 'a dual system of discrimination', which puts them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their gender and race.⁵ Yet, some female activists heavily criticize womanism for enabling Black women to divorce themselves from feminism on the grounds of racial differences, for neglecting feminists' efforts in defending women, and for its imperialistic essence that stems from its objective of making 'U.S. black women' the center of female activism on the global scale.⁶ Multicultural feminists, who consider 'race, ethnicity, sex, and class' as the reasons behind women's subjugation, in the same way as womanists, are among the female activists who find fault with womanist agendas. They criticize womanism 'for its exclusionist stance' towards 'white feminists'. In response, Walker changed the womanist essence to make it more inclusive, inviting men as well as women from various racial backgrounds, to avoid making the same feminist mistake of excluding others.⁷

As a womanist novel, Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986) does not exclude White women from its womanist equation. The inclusive quality of the text calls for an American sisterhood between Black and White women and addresses the widening gap between feminism and womanism in the 1980s through its reversal of the Victorian conventions of the antebellum South.⁸ These conventions demanded that White women be seen as 'pure, clean, sexually repressed, and physically fragile' while Black women were discerned as 'dirty, licentious, physically strong, and knowledgeable about the evil done in the world'.⁹ Williams cuts through these outmoded conventions and introduces a Black heroine, Dessa Rose, who is in Phyllis Marynick Palmer's words 'physically fragile' in not being able to breastfeed her child, Desmond, and a White heroine, Ruth Elizabeth Carson, who is both 'licentious' in committing adultery with Nathan and 'physically strong' in being a mammy for Dessa's newly-born Black child.¹⁰ More to the point, the author aims at a sisterhood between Black women and White women, a sisterhood that, however fraught, makes them equals and also acknowledges that the bond linking them is too strong to be severed by the obstacles that might face them. Those obstacles entail the social conventions of class and race, among other factors. Williams's *Dessa Rose* aims at reconciling the difference between womanism and feminism through its two heroines, Dessa and Ruth.

Since *Dessa Rose*'s publication in 1986, a few scholars have attempted to shed light on the evolving sisterhood between its two female protagonists, Dessa and Ruth. There is no consensus among these scholars regarding sisterhood in the novel. While Lisa Maria Hogeland and Venetria k. Paton for instance point to the term's limitation in Williams's work, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, John C. Inscoc, and Tyrone Williams point to the role of sisterhood in addressing new possibilities to

⁴ Nicole Rousseau, 'Historical Womanist Theory: Re-visioning Black Feminist Thought', *Race, Gender & Class* 20, 3-4 (2013), 191-204 (p. 196).

⁵ Aleksandra Izgarjan and Slobodanka Markov, 'Alice Walker's Womanism: Perspectives Past and Present', *Gender Studies* 11.1 (2012), 304-315 (p. 311).

⁶ Phillips, p. xlvii.

⁷ Izgarjan, p. 12.

⁸ Regarding the Americans' conformity with the Victorian conventions, Phyllis Marynick Palmer suggests that 'although Americans did not have Victoria as their queen, they were Victorians in their economy, industry, and culture. The United States accepted and emulated the English belief in the dual nature of womanhood, and similarly assigned the aspects of this nature to particular classes of women' (Phyllis Marynick Palmer, 'White Women/Black Women: The Dualism of Female Identity and Experience in the United States', *Feminist Studies* 9.1 [1983], 151-170 (p. 157)).

⁹ Palmer, p. 157.

¹⁰ Palmer, p. 157.

the readers, the novelist's clever use of it, and the main happening leading to it between the two female protagonists in *Dessa Rose*, respectively.¹¹ Yet, these scholars briefly mention sisterhood in their analyses of the novel and its role in mirroring the widening gulf between Black and White women during Williams's lifetime. In using Bonnie Thornton Dill's definition of sisterhood 'as a nurturant supportive feeling of attachment and loyalty to other women which grows out of a shared experience of oppression', this article sees *Dessa Rose* as an appeal for an American bond of sisterhood in black and white, between feminists and womanists, through the evolving sisterhood between its two female protagonists.¹²

Dessa and Ruth's sisterhood is a case in point to such a definition. While Ruth is vulnerable to Mr. Oscar's rape attempt in his plantation, Dessa is also subject to Nehemiah's attempts to undress her. And the two women do not establish sisterhood until the moment they save each other from the two oppressive figures. Seen in this light, the novel functions as Williams's appeal to feminists and womanists to form a bond of sisterhood in black and white, based on equality, reciprocity, and trust.

In a lengthy discussion of the novel's title, Williams stresses that it evolved 'from "Meditations of History" (too academic), from "Dangerous Women" (too radical feminist), rejected "Dessa's Song," (too sentimental) and compromised with *Dessa Rose* (emphasis on "rose" as both noun and verb)'.¹³ The novel is inspired by two historical incidents from the antebellum South. The first story is based on the 1829 Kentucky incident of a pregnant Black woman, Dinah, leading a slave coffle's revolt.¹⁴ After getting caught, she 'was hanged in the courthouse yard at Greenupsberg', after giving birth to her child, 'on May 25th of the following year'.¹⁵ The second story is of a White North Carolinian woman who turned her farm into a place of refuge for fugitive slaves in 1830.¹⁶ The discovery of the refuge came after 'a [plantation] child said to [the party of citizens that] his mammy dressed victuals every day for 4 or 5 runaways, & shewed the spot'.¹⁷ In justifying her choice of the two historical figures in the Author's Note, Williams finds it 'sad [...] that these two women never met' (p. 5). Those women's fictional counterparts in the novel are Dessa and Ruth respectively. Both heroines, Dessa and Ruth, exist under appalling circumstances

¹¹ See Lisa Maria Hogeland, *Feminism and Its Fictions: The Consciousness-Raising Novel and the Women's Liberation Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); Venetria K. Paton, *Women in Chain: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 'Black and White Womanhood in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose: Mammies, Ladies, Rebels*', in *Women in Literature: Reading through the Lens of Gender* ed. by Jerilyn Fisher and Ellen S. Silber (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003); John C. Inscoe, 'Slave Rebellion in the First Person: The Literary "Confessions" of Nat Turner and *Dessa Rose*', *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 97.4 (October 1989), 419-436; Tyrone Williams, *Masterplots II: African American Literature*, rev. edn (Pasadena: Salem Press, 2009), iv.

¹² Bonnie Thornton Dill, 'Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood', *Feminist Studies* 9.1 (Spring 1983), 131-150, (p. 132).

¹³ Sherley Anne Williams and Geraldine Smith-Wright, 'The Lion's History: The Ghetto Writes B[il]ack [with RESPONSE]', *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 76.2/3 (Summer/Fall 1993), 245-66 (p. 258).

¹⁴ Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999 [1986]), p. 5. All further references are to this edition.

¹⁵ Anita P. Wholuba, 'A Generation of Witnesses: Neo-Testimonial Practices in Flight to Canada, *Dessa Rose*, Beloved, Kindred, and the Chaneyville Incident' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, Florida State University, 2007), p. 26.

¹⁶ Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts*, in which Williams 'discovered the second [story]', lacks details about the North Carolinian woman's fate following this discovery (Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 5th edn (New York: International Publishers, 1974), p. 5).

¹⁷ Aptheker, p. 289.

vis-à-vis their gender and race. Ruth is a single mother, of Clara and Timmy, who is affected by both her husband, Bertie Sutton, leaving for the sake of making more capital through gambling in other plantations as well as the death of her mammy, whose 'confidence' used to calm her fears about Bertie's deed (p. 110). Dessa receives a delayed death sentence, thanks to her pregnancy, for murdering her master, Terrell Vaughn, who killed her husband, Kaine. As a result, she finds herself under observer Adam Nehemiah's 'white gaze' in Sheriff Hughes's plantation, from where she eventually escapes with the help of Cully, Harker, Nathan, and Jemina leading her to the Sutton's Glen, where Ruth is the plantation mistress.¹⁸

The heroines' first encounter takes place in Ruth's room in the Sutton's Glen just hours after Dessa escapes Hughes's farm with the help of fugitive slaves and gives birth to Desmond. The third chapter begins with discomfort and lack of trust between the women in which Dessa 'comes out of her postpartum delirium' to catch a glimpse of a White lady and learns that she is sleeping on that same lady's bed.¹⁹ To her amazement, Dessa's pretense of sleep, so Ruth does not notice her, was to no avail as the White woman shouts 'you not doing a thing but playing possum' (p. 98). The former remains silent to the latter's provocation as she cannot get involved in an argument in her adverse circumstances, which even prevent her from breastfeeding her newly born child. Despite her prejudice towards Black people in general and Black women in particular, Ruth breastfeeds Desmond, Dessa's child, 'to quiet his wailing' (p. 101). Ruth was 'the only available lactating woman when... [Dessa] was too ill to breastfeed'.²⁰ In this respect, Williams reverses the conventions of the antebellum South in portraying Ruth as a mammy in the sense that she is a wet nurse and caretaker of a Black child in the same way as mammies used to be 'wet nurses and caretakers of white children'.²¹ Such a reversal is the author's vehicle to shed light on the two-faced antebellum conventions, which tolerated Black women being wet nurses for White children and did not tolerate White women being wet nurses for Black children. The 'wave of embarrassment [which] had swept over her [Ruth]' as well as Ada and Harker's 'startled faces' at this juncture show the extent to which Ruth has broken social convention. Following their reaction, she starts 'feeling somehow vindicated in her actions by their very confusion' and regrets 'becoming wet nurse for darky'. However, this feeling does not persist, as she [soon] herself liked to watch the baby as he nursed [...] the contrast between his caramel-colored fist and the rosy cream of her breast' (pp. 101-02). Williams considers the criticism she receives for 'daring to ... suggest that a white woman could overcome what black people sometimes see as a monolithic racism and actually nurse a black child', as 'praise for a job well done'.²² Ruth's breastfeeding and nursing of Dessa's child foreshadows an eventual sisterhood between both women.

As the novel progresses, the two heroines disagree over Mammy's identity. This dissent springs from their 'confusion and commingling' about 'Mammy/mammy'.²³ Ruth perceives Mammy as a mother figure who used 'to dress [her] so pretty' and to whom she 'was like [one's own] child'. Meanwhile, Dessa believes that Ruth does not know about Mammy as much as she

¹⁸ George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, 2nd edn (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), p. x.

¹⁹ Doris Davenport, 'Review', *Black American Literary Forum* 20.3 (Autumn 1986), 335-340, (p. 337).

²⁰ Gretchen J. Michlitsch, 'Dessa and the Crazy White Woman: Cross-Racial Breastfeeding in Shirley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*', *Australian Feminist Studies* 19.45 (2004), 329-339, (p. 333).

²¹ Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 4.

²² Williams, 'The Lion's History', p. 251.

²³ Kristen Lillvis, *Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), p. 49.

claims to because 'Mammy have a name, have children' of whom the White woman is unaware. At this stage, Ruth functions as a microcosm for the White people to whom mammy was the focal point during their happy childhood, 'and yet [they did] not know her real name'.²⁴ Thus, she was a function and a role, rather than a person. Taking the argument one step further, Dessa delves deeply into Mammy's life details in saying 'her name was Rose' and that she 'gave birth to ten chi'ren that come in the world living' (pp. 118-19). In confusing 'the two mothers, eliding them into a single mother figure', Dessa and Ruth position 'themselves as adoptive or figurative sisters'.²⁵

Despite this new position, Dessa's declarations quickly trigger Ruth's extreme reaction in calling Dessa a 'Liar' and eventually leaving the room (p. 119). Ruth therefore holds a grudge against Dessa in calling her 'darker', 'wench', and 'insolent slut', after leaving the room, and also in thinking 'venomously' that she 'ought to be whipped. And if [she] was [hers], [she]'d do it, too', associating herself with the cruel plantation owners of the antebellum South in the mind of the reader (p. 121). Ruth's racism stems from both her love of Mammy 'that she was lonely, that the silence since Mammy's death sometimes came near to crushing her' as well as her confusion about 'think[ing] of herself as Mammy's child, a darker's child' (pp. 121-23). Ruth has conflicting feelings that reflect the multiple attitudes in a situation in constant flux. She ranges from protective care (baby) to loathing (a Black mother). Williams is unafraid to illustrate the spectrum of attitudes including those less attractive aspects of humanity.

Their disagreement over Mammy slightly damages the evolving sisterhood between the two women. Two key events give it a new pulse. One is when Ruth comes to the realization that they '[weren't] talking about the same person', which means her Mammy and Dessa's Mammy are two non-identical women (p. 154). This awareness is raised by Nathan's confirmation that "'Dessa wasn't no ways related to Dorcas'", Ruth's Mammy (p. 133). Ironically, coming to the realization that they do not share a Mammy/mother helps in repairing their sisterhood.

And the second key event is when Ruth walks into her room to catch a glimpse of Dessa's 'scarred' bottom and the 'scar tissue plow[ing] through [Dessa's] pubic region', making her realize Dessa's plight (p. 154). In effect, she regrets seeing Dessa's scars because she did not believe Nathan when he said, 'they lashed [Dessa] about the hips and legs, branded her along the insides of her thighs' in challenging him about 'how [does he] know?' Both events lead up to Ruth's talk with Dessa over Mammy in saying 'your mammy birthed you, and mine, mine just helped to raise me', and Dessa in return says that she 'knows that' (pp. 154-55). This eventual agreement on Mammy's relation to each starts the forging of a bond of sisterhood in black and white between Dessa and Ruth. A bond of sisterhood, which in Mojubaolu Olufunke Okome's words, 'ought not to be a relationship of domination, the privileging of one sister over the other'.²⁶

Ruth's love affair with Nathan soon breaks the spirit of reconciliation between both women. While they 'sweated and rested, his face buried in her bosom, one leg caught between hers. She stroked his back; his fingers played purposefully in matted pubic hair, teasing the slick lips of her vagina. Supine, she waited for him to enter her again', Dessa enters the room and shouts "'Nathan...and Miz Ruint—Well, I knew you was a fool—'". To Ruth's surprise, Dessa keeps calling her "Miz Ruint!", 'harshly' and 'deliberately' (pp. 158-59). She is also filled with anger towards Nathan because 'white folks had taken everything in the world from [her] except [her] baby and [her] life and they had tried to take them' (pp. 172-73). And at this juncture, Nathan is

²⁴ Wallace-Sanders, p. 7.

²⁵ Lillvis, p. 49.

²⁶ Mojubaolu Olufunke Okome, 'What Women, Whose Development? A Critical Analysis of Reformist Evangelism on African Women' in *Africa Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, ed. by Oyeronke Oyewumi (London: African World Press, 2003), p. 91.

willing to risk his life and other lives in 'getting something that the white man always kept for himself', Ruth (p. 173). Such a risk stems from the fact that Ruth's husband, Bertie Sutton, might 'kill [him] or Harker, or anybody [t]here, for less than what [he is] doing' (p. 174). In doing so, 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'.²⁷

After having an extramarital affair with a Black man, Ruth is nevertheless viewed as 'loose, immoral, and oversexed' as Black women were generally seen in the antebellum. Françoise Burgess links these perceptions to the Black women's 'polar opposite', White women, 'whose ideological attributes, defined by the plantation ideology—[their] fragility, purity, chastity and domesticity—and standards of beauty—the blond silky hair, the blue eyes' made them the Black women's 'first and heaviest burden'.²⁸ White women were overall seen as "'good women" and Black women were generally seen as "'bad" women'.²⁹ Ruth is not the only White woman in the novel who is 'sexually loose', to borrow an expression from bell hooks, Miz Lorraine is also perceived to be "loose".³⁰ A few years prior to Ruth's sexual liaison with Nathan, Miz Lorraine, a White mistress, forced him to have an extramarital affair with her as she 'laughed, gently, mockingly, and made him sit on the edge of the bed'. She used to take 'her bedmates young, saw 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' (p. 156). In common with the rest of Miz Lorraine's 'bedmates', Nathan was sold since 'she had [eventually] decided, as far as Nathan could see on a whim, to marry, and contrary to her word, had sold him [off]' (pp. 157-58). Williams's inclusion of Miz Lorraine, Nathan, and Ruth as characters not only debunks 'the myth of the black male rapist', but it also debunks the myth of the pure White woman.³¹

At the beginning of chapter five, the fugitive slaves go ahead with the plan for 'selling themselves back into slavery so as to get a stake big enough to where [they] could all leave from round there'. Additionally, Harker encourages 'the idea of someone posing as the master and of the peoples running away after they'd been sold and the "master" selling them again in another town'. Due to his ability to 'read some and write a little', Cully is the prospective candidate for playing the role. But his 'nappy hair' and young age pushed the fugitive slaves to change their minds about him 'oversee[ing] the place—since he was so white—while they was gone' (pp. 169-70). Consequently, Ruth is the only other person available to play the role. And she eventually accepts their request because she aims to liberate herself from her husband as 'she would have no more rights than [the fugitive slaves] when Bertie came back' (p. 150). In other words, his authority over her embodies 'the legitimacy of male authority over women in the household [which] was a cornerstone of the slavery edifice'.³² The already broken spirit of reconciliation between Dessa and Ruth remains an obstacle in the fugitive slaves' path. While Ruth 'sent word by Cully that she wasn't going no place with [Dessa] till [she] begged pardon for calling her out her name', Miz Ruint, reflecting Ruth's immorality in her liaison with Nathan. Dessa at first refuses to apologize as she 'had a lot to be hot with [Ruth] about and [she] would've bit [her] tongue before [she] said

²⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 63.

²⁸ Françoise Burgess, 'The White Woman: The Black Woman's Nemesis', *Revue française d'études américaines* 67 (January 1996), 99-107, (p. 100).

²⁹ Palmer, p. 157.

³⁰ bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 60.

³¹ hooks, p. 60.

³² Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 216.

sorry' (p. 179). Later in this chapter, after developing a relationship with Harker, Dessa concedes to apologizing to Ruth 'for being rude' despite of 'her reluctance to admit [she] was wrong'. This apology stems from Dessa's awareness of Ruth's 'right to say who she wants in her room' (p. 190).

In their journey to the West for achieving their goal with the other fugitive slaves,³³ Dessa and Ruth stop at Mr. Oscar's plantation, where they have to spend the night. Concurrently, 'Nathan was sent round to the Quarters with the rest of [their] people' (pp. 196-97). At this night, Mr. Oscar attempts to rape Ruth in the dead of night. Before Dessa comes to the realization that 'she was trying to get him out the bed', she thinks ill of Ruth in expecting her to 'get in heat and pick up with whatever was handy' and she also seems eager to tell Nathan about Ruth's misdeeds. But when asked for help to 'get [Mr. Oscar] out the bed', Dessa does not hesitate to protect Ruth in 'pounding him all about the head with [the pillow]'. The success of their joint effort to get the man out of the room heralds the evolution of Dessa and Ruth's bond of sisterhood since at that time '[their] only protection was [themselves] and each other's'. After witnessing what Ruth has been through, Dessa is conscious of the plight of White women as '[she heretofore] hadn't known white men could use a white woman like that, just take her by force same as they could with [them]', Black women (pp. 200-02). In protecting Ruth, Dessa opens the door for sisterhood between women in the sense that the former starts sympathizing with Black people in saying that 'if white folks knew slaves as she knew [them], wouldn't be no slavery' and continues to say that 'she felt slavery was wrong, because peoples was no more to you than a pair of hands, stock, sometimes not even a name'. At the same time, Dessa starts admiring Ruth since '[she] served her, yes, but she didn't treat [her] the way [she] had some treated on that journey, had never treated one of [them] with all that yelling and cuffing which was the way many masters did' (p. 211).

As the novel unfolds, the bond of sisterhood between Dessa and Ruth weakens after the former rejects the latter's offer of friendship. Dessa, nevertheless, has two main reasons. On the one hand, Dessa still remembers Ruth's sexual encounter with Nathan in thinking that she 'was the damndest white woman. White as a sheet and about that much sense—sleeping with negroes, hiding runaways, wanting to be [her] friend'. And pondering over whether friends 'would [...] put [them] in danger the way she had' because Ruth's love affair has endangered all the runaway slaves, including Dessa. On the other hand, Dessa still has prejudice towards White people since for her "'Friend" to [Ruth] might be like "promise" to white folks. Something to break if it would do them some good' (p. 219).

In the wake of her shock at hearing Ruth's request, Dessa decides to temporarily leave the hotel room and start walking on the street as she suddenly hears a man's voice calling her name. The thought that someone else was being called 'kept [her] walking' until 'a hand clap [her] on [her] arm and jerked [her] around'. At this moment in time, Dessa speculates about the possibilities that he is either after her money, hidden in her money belt, or mistakes her for someone else. But as soon as she wakes up in jail and hears the sheriff saying "'now just a minute, Nemi—'", she is cognizant of the latter's purpose, to drag her back to slavery, as well as his name, Adam Nehemiah (pp. 219-21). He is the author of *The Masters' Complete Guide to Dealing with Slaves and Other Dependents*, through which he aims at gaining a reputation for being 'an important southern author'. And he is also in the process of writing *The Roots of Rebellion in the Slave Population and Some Means of Eradicating Them*, which originates from the boom in 'uprisings among slaves' (pp. 23-25). In the sheriff's presence, a heated argument takes place between Dessa and Nehemiah.

³³ According to Adeleke Adeeko 'although Whites are present [in the West], there are no slave catchers and patrollers' (Adeleke Adeeko, *The Slave's Rebellion: Fiction, History and Orature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 165).

In her defense, the first claims that she belongs to Ruth, "Miz Carlisle" in her words, and that she "takes care of her baby, Clara—". However, the second objects to her claims in telling the sheriff that Dessa "match the description in the poster" and that the slave he has been looking for "got scars all over her butt". He puts forward these arguments to convince the sheriff to "have [her] dress off", so he can confirm whether she is the person he has been looking for. The sheriff does not give in to Nehemiah's demand as he resolves to send one of his men 'down to the hotel to see could they find Miz Carlisle' to make sure that Dessa is telling the truth. The latter is eventually accompanied to the cell by the sheriff.

While being in the cell, Dessa yearns for a sisterhood with Ruth, which stems from her dwelling in the thought that 'she had Miz Lady [Ruth]'; who seems to be the only one who can get Dessa out of jail, especially if Ruth testifies that Dessa is her property. But Nehemiah interrupts her flow of thought when he approaches her cell and calls her a "sly bitch" (pp. 221-24). This sexual slur springs from his prejudice against women in general and Black women in particular. The fact that the sheriff asks him to step back calms her fears and makes her dwell in the thought that he 'would let [Nehemiah] do [her] nothing till Miz Lady [Ruth] come'. Dessa at this moment in time no longer considers Ruth as Mistress 'Fel, Miz 'Fel, or Miz Ruint but she henceforth perceives her as 'a respectable white lady'. In other words, she thinks highly of Ruth as a savior whose word is against 'the word of a crazy white man', Nehemiah. The shift in name calling, therefore, reflects a bond of sisterhood, which is based on trust and mutual respect between the women.

Ruth arrives on the scene and accuses both Nehemiah and the Sheriff of "prey[ing] on defenseless womens" (pp. 224-26). She keeps insisting that Dessa is hers and that they 'mistook [her] girl for someone else', subsequently Nehemiah warns Ruth of Dessa's deceptive nature because for him a 'nice white lady like [Ruth] can't know the blackness of the darky heart. Sing and laugh, and all the time plotting'. And he continues in saying that Dessa is 'a danger to womanhood' (pp. 227-28). He classifies her as both dangerous and deceiving since she does not meet his expectations about Black women being less dangerous than their male counterparts. Seen in this light, such expectations put Nehemiah under the umbrella of the epoch's 'white elites', who 'found men of African descent to be more threatening than women because they believed that Black men were naturally violent'.³⁴ Ruth turns a deaf ear to him as she wonders aloud whether "one little pesky *colored* gal do all that?" (p. 228). Amidst her confusion on how to liberate Dessa, the latter 'patted that money belt under [her] dress' to make Ruth aware of the possibility that they can use it as an excuse to prevent Nehemiah as well as the sheriff from undressing Dessa. In line with this, Ruth requests talking to the sheriff privately (p. 229). While he complies with her request, she asks Dessa to show him the money belt. And Ruth also tells him that nobody is going to undress Dessa since they are both 'carrying a lot of money' and 'traveling alone'. Upon hearing from Ruth, the sheriff resolves to send Aunt Chole, an old Black woman, to check Dessa's body but Nehemiah refuses in crying that the sheriff 'can't set no darky to check a darky, catch a darky' (p. 230). Despite such objections, the sheriff continues putting his trust in Aunt Chole, who eventually tells him that she 'ain't seed nothing on [Dessa's] butt'. Her testimony is nevertheless the fruit of Dessa's anecdote that she 'was scarred as a child; girl was watching [her] dropped [her] in the fire' as well as the 'quarter coin' that she took from Dessa (p. 231). At this moment in time, Nehemiah is enraged and questions the sheriff's blind faith in Aunt Chole but to no avail. When he also tries to stop Dessa from leaving, the sheriff immediately stops him. The futility of Nehemiah's attempts and his

³⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 56.

desperation provoke his insult to Dessa and Ruth in shouting "You-all in this together...Womanhood...All alike. Sluts". And the sight of Nehemiah 'down on his knees' symbolizes his defeat to Dessa and Ruth's sisterhood, which trumps gender over color. The sisterhood blooms: once both women introduce themselves to each other as Ruth and Dessa rather than a mistress and a slave; and also once Dessa no longer 'hold[s] [anything] against [Ruth],' neither her class nor her interracial liaison with Nathan nor her race (pp. 232-33).

As indicated earlier, in addressing the widening gap between feminism and womanism, Williams casts light on an evolving sisterhood between her novel's two heroines, Dessa and Ruth. Despite their initially rigid race prejudice, ostensibly stemming from their disagreement over Mammy and Nathan, Dessa saves Ruth from Mr. Oscar's attempted rape. And Ruth saves Dessa from Nehemiah's attempts to drag her back to slavery. Minus each other's protection, Dessa and Ruth are subject to Nehemiah's physical abuse and Mr. Oscar's sexual harassment. Within this context, the two heroines cannot overcome the oppressive figures unless they maintain their sisterhood. More to the point, sisterhood in *Dessa Rose* addresses the widening gap between feminists and womanists in the sense that their 'only protection [from the woes of patriarchy is themselves] and [one another]' (p. 202).

Williams utilizes the two heroines, who are microcosms for 'mistresses and slave women in the antebellum South [who] lived and often suffered together under an oppressive [White] patriarchy', to remind her feminist and womanist readers about the subjugation of Black and White women in the antebellum South.³⁵ White women had 'the duty of pleasing fathers and, later, husbands took precedence over any dream of autonomy'.³⁶ Meanwhile, Black women were 'subject to traditional male authority as well as the authority of white slaveowners, assume[d] the lowest position'.³⁷ The bond of sisterhood between Dessa and Ruth enables them to attain a better position. It not only saves them from Nehemiah and Mr. Oscar but also liberates them, Dessa from jail and slavery and Ruth from her prejudice against Black people in general and Black women in particular.

³⁵ Erica Filidoro, 'Failed Sisterhood: Expectations and Betrayal Between the Women of the Antebellum South', *OKSHOSH Scholar* 3 (April 2008), 34-43, (p. 34).

³⁶ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, 'Review: Plantation Women in the Slave South', *Reviews in American History* 11.2 (December 1983), 516-520, (p. 517).

³⁷ Elizabeth Anne Beaulieu, *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* (London: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. 31.

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