

A Study on Slave Mother's Subjectivity Construction in Neo-slave Narrative *Dessa Rose*

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Abstract: Sherley Anne Williams is a famous contemporary African American woman writer who is keenly concerned with the life of the antebellum enslaved female blacks and their destiny. She realizes that the female black slaves are regarded as others in slavery and objectified by the whites, therefore her work *Dessa Rose* gives accounts of these female slaves, especially the slave mother *Dessa Rose*'s misery and fight for freedom and subjectivity. While many scholars and critics have identified the importance of slave mothers' escape from oppression and objectification, what is left is a more in-depth analysis of their struggle and transformation from object to subject. This essay attempts to explore the causes of the subject consciousness, the protagonist's struggle for subject status, and the development of her subjectivity construction from the perspective of Marxist philosophy.

Keywords: slave mother; objectification; subjectivity construction; Marxist philosophy

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1. Introduction

Since the second half of the 20th century, African American writers have created abundantly neo-slave narratives and these works have carved a niche in contemporary American literature. In *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered*, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu defines the neo-slave narratives as "contemporary fictional works which take slavery as their subject matter and usually feature enslaved protagonists" (xiii)^[1]. According to Beaulieu, the neo-slave narratives by black female writers mainly narrate the enslaved black women's slavery experiences from the black women's point of view. What's more, they emphasize the black female slaves, in particular, black slave mothers' changes from subordination to independence and their strong humanity and inner world, focusing on their romantic love, maternal love, sexual exploitation, and more importantly, their continuous struggles against slavery and the final obtainment of freedom and subjectivity with the help of family and community (Elizabeth xiv-xv)^[1].

As a major component of the genre, the neo-slave narratives by contemporary female black writers, with their unique characteristics, have boomed the African American literature, such as Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*, Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* and Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, and received more and more public attention and scholarly criticisms in recent years.

Sherley Anne Williams (1944-1999), an excellent female black poet, novelist, dramatist, occupies an important position in the African American literature. It is widely recognized that Williams' contribution to African American

literature is profound and significant. According to Barbara Christian, “Williams’ writing is rich, intellectually stimulating, beautifully crafted and unique. It is brilliant, and her contributions to the field of African American literature are long-lasting” (48)^[2].

As Williams’ first novel, *Dessa Rose*, is both a critical and a popular success due to the unforgettably emotional and artistic portrayal of American slavery. Williams writes her masterpiece, in part out of a deep sense of dissatisfaction with William Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner* and it is based on two true historical incidents: one is about a black female slave who, despite being pregnant, helped to lead a slave uprising in Kentucky in 1829 and the other is about a white woman who lived lonely on a farm in North Carolina and gave refuge to runaway slaves in 1830. She is particularly moved by both women’s rebellion, and connects the fate of two women who were originally unrelated so as to form a new episode in the novel *Dessa Rose*.

Dessa Rose, the outstanding neo-slave narrative, fully reflects the characteristics of this literary genre. It vividly narrates the fighting of slaves, especially slave mothers, and underline the role of the black community, an important branch of the African culture, on their way of seeking freedom and subjectivity. It pays much more attention to the inner world of the black slave women and expresses their voices which were muted or distorted. Besides, the female black characters in it not only introspect the past undesirable life but look forward to the future.

As a single mother herself, Williams focuses much on the living experience of marginalized black mothers all her life. As Elaine Jordan suggests, the black women’s experiences and “in particular, the meanings they attach to mother, are central themes” (111)^[3] in Williams’ works. It fully depicts both the slave mother Dessa’s anguish, such as her separation with families, sexual humiliation, and endeavors to protect her child and supply him with liberation. To sum up, it pays particular attention to the hard struggles of this slave mother for the freedom of both her child and herself, and more importantly, her extraordinary journey of subjectivity building.

The idea of subject and subjectivity in Marxist philosophy provides the most basic theory and method for human beings to understand and transform the world and offers wisdom and strength for them to live peacefully in the world. Marxist subjectivity philosophy seems to be able to provide a convincing theoretical support and a useful critical tool to read the life trajectory of female characters in neo-slave narratives and analyze their subjectivity building since it values the interaction and transformation between subject and object through practice.

In Marx’s view, subject is the man who could learn and transform self, others and even the world purposefully, consciously and initiatively based on certain social and historical conditions (*Selected Works* 135)^[4]. Marx first proposes the concept of subjectivity in *The Manuscript of 1844* and clearly points out that “subjectivity is not the subject itself, but the characteristics of it” (124)^[5]. Accordingly, like subject, the subjectivity is not innate but generates and develops in the course of interaction between subject and object (124)^[5]. Marxist subjectivity is further elaborated in *The German Ideology*, in which Marx states that human subjectivity is realized through human’s social production and living^[6]. In other words, practice is essential to the realization of subjectivity (54)^[4]. Subject and object can be transformed through practice, that is, the subject becomes object and object turns into subject, or subject’s objectification and object’s subjectification.

According to Marxist subjectivity philosophy, the black women are gender objects as well as racial objects in the white-centered patriarchal society, which place them at the lowest position in the Southern slavery society. However, some of them finally become subjects after hard struggles and their subjectivity is finally constructed and perfected after going through four stages of self-consciousness, self-empowerment, self-action and self-reflection.

2. Self-awareness

Generally speaking, self-consciousness refers to the understanding of self, that is, the awareness of one’s own physical and mental activities, and the relationship with others, including the position and the role in the community. According to Marxist philosophy, people will acquire self-consciousness mainly from human practice and interaction (57)^[5]. Living in the antebellum South, black slave mothers are inevitably involved in practice and connection with others, white or

black, which produce their strong self-consciousness. With their awakening of self-awareness, they realize their object position in slavery, and begin the journey of subjectivity construction through long and arduous struggles. The emergence of slave mothers' self-consciousness is triggered by negative factors such as alienated labor and family disintegration as well as positive ones like family nurturing, romantic love and maternal stimulation. What's more, their initiative of self-consciousness, which means making responses or taking actions to external or internal stimuli or influences, gradually plays a major role in stimulating their first step to liberation and subjectivity construction. They take actions differently on their way to freedom, some choose to flee from cruel slavery and live in seclusion, while others actively fight against the white slave masters. No matter what kind of resistance they take, the awakening of their self-consciousness is a crucial step for female black slaves to construct their subjectivity.

In the African traditional culture, family and community are the most important places for black people to live in, receive education and develop themselves. That is to say, children always get protection and nurturing, learn black traditions and legends of their ancestors from mothers, relatives or other community members. In a racist culture that assumes black children unlovable, unworthy and inferior, the black mother instills in her children the strong sense of being loved through loving and raising them, enabling her children to stand against and subvert the racist discourses that legalize the racial inferiority and commodify blacks as objects. Dessa Rose's mother also carries forward the black tradition, always telling Dessa the history of Africans and stories of her family members, which bring her self-recognition. Therefore, Dessa's childhood is filled with storytelling, songs, and folktales which have passed down from generations. The traditional black culture transmitted by her mother awakens Dessa's self-consciousness and helps to build her black identity.

All enslaved blacks, in terms of Marx, were bound to go through alienated labor. Under the oppression of merciless white slave owners, female blacks, the lowest group in slavery system, were destined to experience more tribulation, as some of them as house slaves had to spend most of their time and energy taking care of the white slave owners' children and housework. They underwent physical pain, emotional suffering and psychological humiliation. These painful experiences generally led them to be aware of their low status and the need to pursue freedom. Dessa Rose develops strong self-consciousness through this kind of alienated labor.

Dessa is arranged to do hard work like black male slaves in the field because of her light skin color and strong physique. The mistress refuses Dessa working in the big house as a maid in case of the affairs with her master. In antebellum America, enslaved black women, especially the light female blacks, were always taken as the objects of white slave owners' sexual desire and therefore caused the envy of their mistresses. The physical strength of Dessa causes her to be victimized in the plantation as a main laborer and then leads to her alienation from the labor, which helps her to realize gradually her status as a female slave and precipitate her eagerness for free life.

Farah illustrates in details the romantic love as an "assertion of the life-force" (526)^[7] to the black women and a resource which provides them with "the energy to pursue genuine change within our world" (526)^[4]. Romantic love gives Dessa the sense of self and helps her fully understand and love herself. For her, romance is a kind of affirmation of her existence. It is Kaine who chooses her as wife and builds up a sense of belonging for her, which Dessa Rose is so proud of. The intimate moment between Kaine and Dessa "serves to resist dominant norms of white standards of beauty" (529)^[7] and lays the foundation for her self-consciousness.

The maternal love is valued by African American culture as it concerns the psychological and physical well-being of blacks in the white dominated society and the motherhood is a site where black women can learn the importance of valuing and defining themselves, the necessity of relying on themselves and the certainty of empowering both children and themselves (Andrew 4)^[8]. When Dessa Rose finds that she is pregnant, she comes up with the idea of escape. As a mother, Dessa will not allow anyone to hurt her child. She does not want to be like her mother, losing all children and living alone. Thus the child becomes Dessa's greatest force for survival.

With the initiative of self-consciousness, Dessa finally throw off her submission to assert herself as equal as whites. Her fight and flight are active resistances against exploitative slavery and reflect her eagerness to obtain liberation and

subjectivity as human beings.

3. Self-empowerment

In order to take revenge for her husband, Kaine's death, Dessa fatally wounds masters, causing her auction to a trader. Before leaving the plantation, the vicious mistress irons Dessa's genitals a letter R. The wound actually helps her work to recover and to rebuild her strength. During this self-empowerment process, this enslaved black female makes great effort to enhance her ability to know herself and others, love family and resist white people.

Although having been severely hurt, Dessa never asks for a mercy. She holds a strong desire and persistent determination to survive her child and herself. In order to spare her future child and herself from the fate of enslavement, Dessa, being a self-conscious and militant black woman, participates in revolts twice. She is even given the name "devil woman" by other slaves with admiration because of her daring role in the slave uprising.

Dessa strengthens herself with the nourishing black community, especially three black men Nathan, Cully, and Harker, who befriend her and revolt with her on the coffle. Dessa is sentenced to death because of the rebellion. The trio of the male slaves eventually deliver Dessa to Sutton's Glen. In this way, Dessa's reclaiming of herself as a free black woman depends on a supportive black community. A total community of bloodkin and friends would strengthen its individual members. It is through the black community that black slaves resist their oppression and then become somewhat independent. Therefore thanks to other female slaves at Glen as well as four male companies, Dessa not only recovers from her physical wounds, but begins the slow process of going through her traumatic past and courageously facing up the present. The black community empowers Dessa by protecting her, loving her and upholding her right to tell her own story, to change her position of silence and powerlessness to narration and power, as Homi said, "starting the sign" (1)^[9] of her new identity as a subject.

Dessa defines herself through telling her personal story, rather than submitting herself to the demands of the white writer. For Dessa, "talking with the white man was a game; it marked time and she dared a little with him, playing on words" (Sherley 60)^[11] to defeat his white domination. Dessa effectively resists the white writer Nehemiah's hegemonic writing through her storytelling. The shift from silence to narration demonstrates this enslaved black woman's progress toward black female consciousness and subject. Dessa Rose's black storytelling takes priority over Nehemiah's white written words and eventually the dominant status of white patriarchal institution. bell hooks reveals in *Talking Black: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, the oppressed people resist by "identifying themselves as subject shaping their new identity" (45)^[10], through telling their own stories. The nature of storytelling finds "not only in resistance to domination and dehumanization, but in its validation of African-American culture and communities as significant to the development of self-determined, self-defined subjects" (45)^[10]. Through her storytelling, Dessa Rose moves from object to subject. That is to say, Dessa gains the narrative control over her own story and consequently gets closer to her subjectivity by assuming control over her story.

Dessa Rose's subject consciousness becomes stronger during the self-empowerment stage and she becomes more independent and self-reliant. As she actively manages to liberate herself from the oppression, this female black slave moves from a position where her identity is defined by others, to a new one in which she defines it herself. She ceases to be an object and may think, speak and act as a subject.

4. Self-action

Self-action is the decisive phase of subjectivity construction. Once human subjectivity develops to a certain extent, the initiative will play a role in prompting people to take actions to consolidate their subject position and transform the previous subjects to be their objects. According to Marx, subject and object will go through the reciprocal transformation

in the context of a subject-object dialectic with some actions led by the initiative. That is to say, in some condition, subject will finally become object while object will turn to subject. Black women's subjectivity construction is in fact their journey from object to subject by means of their positive actions.

Dessa Rose's self-action starts from her journey to West searching for freedom and is facilitated by the assistance of black community, the romantic love with Harker as well as the interracial friendship with white woman Ruth. Sensing Dessa's shame and reluctance to engage in a romantic relationship with him, Harker eliminates her worries by telling her how much he values her in spite of her physical scarring as it only increases her value. The sincerity of Harker's words and actions heal Dessa and help her to love again. Harker's love allows Dessa Rose to see herself as someone capable of being loved and loving others in a physical and spiritual sense despite all that has been taken from her. Black women would be empowered by the romantic love and fight more courageously against the slavery which oppresses them as it is linked to "power and resistance" (Farah 526)^[7].

Williams puts an emphasis on the interracial relationships between black women and white women. Both white and black women are trapped in the patriarchy, although the white females hold a higher status than black ones in the slavery South. Therefore their mutual support and care will play an important role in getting out of patriarchal oppression. Dessa gradually changes her attitude and is grateful to the white woman's unconventional behavior, breastfeeding her baby, which empowers them and stimulates their subsequent resistance.

When Dessa and her friends stay in Mr. Oscar's, Dessa hears Ruth's crying out for help and finds that Ruth is being assaulted by the white man. Two women work together to drive him out of the bedroom and realize that "the only protection was ourselves and each others" (202)^[11]. The female alliance can be formed and act as the impetus of their resistance.

On her way to liberation, this slave mother's subject consciousness is strengthened and prompts her to take overt actions to fight against the slavery system. Whether black fellowmen or white friends, male or female, all provide her with great support and finally help her construct the subjectivity.

5. Self-reflection

In the last stage of subjectivity development, subject reflects on self in relation to objects, such as the contemplation of his (her) changes, his (her) position in the world, value realization and life program. The black females in the neo-slave narratives finally complete the process of emancipating themselves by pondering on themselves and their life through storytelling and envisioning their future.

In the case of Dessa, her self-reflection is revealed in her strong belief in her newly gained subjectivity. Dessa's telling her story to her son shows how proud she is of her subjectivity. Ultimately, Dessa succeeds in the journey to freedom and lives out in western territories freely with Harker and her son. She tells her story to her son, make him write it down, and then repeat it to her: "Well, this the childrens have heard from our own lips. I hope they never have to pay what it cost us to own ourselves.... Oh, we paid for our childrens place in the world again, and again" (181)^[11]. For Dessa, her son Mony represents the enslaved past, the expectant future, as Mony is what motivates her to struggle for freedom. Now by being able to tell her own story, Dana successfully moves from being a "Darky" to a "Wench" and eventually to the "Negress" as an "I" narrator which symbolizes her subject status.

All slave mothers suffer from inhumane torture and oppression and have the mark of whipping, and undergo spiritual humiliation as they are all used as fertility machines to increase assets to the white slaveowners' plantations, and they also experience the painful separation from their family. What distinguishes some from others is that these slave mothers' self-consciousness is awakened and consequently they gain the awareness of their slave status and their deprived subject. While fighting the white slaveholders, they also enhance the knowledge of others as well as themselves. With the assistance and support of lovers, community friends and even some white people who are sympathetic with their misery, these enslaved black mothers finally escape from slavery, gain liberation, construct their subjectivity and start a new life in their new home.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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