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**THE PORTRAYAL OF THE RACIAL IDENTITY IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *LINDEN HILLS*****T. Sangeetha****Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Periyar E.V.R. College  
(Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu.****ABSTRACT**

In *Linden Hills*, Naylor dramatizes the possible negative consequences of achieving the American Dream, an achievement which has eluded most African Americans for over a century. At a time when education as a means of social mobility is being touted as a savior for African Americans, Naylor raises serious questions about that means as well as its ends. She presents a series of stark vignettes of well educated, successful middle class African-Americans who have achieved the dream at the expense of their racial identities. To emphasize her theme, she employs counterpoint creating two simultaneous narratives that together explore the loss of racial identity and the need for retrieving the identification.

**KEY WORDS:** *Linden Hills*, *Inferno*, *Nedeed*, *Community*.**INTRODUCTION**

*Linden Hills* has been analyzed from several perspectives. Some critics have examined the novel's indebtedness to Dante's *Inferno*; its treatment of the theme of the novel is sisterhood and its portrayal of a perverted Eden and its relationship to Plato's Cave. All critics acknowledge the equal importance of Willie and Willa in Naylor's treatment of the complex issue of racial identity. Willie and Willa seem mysteriously connected. The similarities of names are diminutives of the name "William" means 'resolute warrior; protector' or "defender." In *Linden Hills*, however, the neighborhood is middle class and the novel revolves around a central metaphor associated with Dante's *Inferno*.

In *Linden Hills*, which continues the fictional world of Brewster Place but moves up in social class to the black bourgeois housing development dominated by the mortician Luther Nedeed, Naylor places a more balanced emphasis on both men and women? At the same time there seem to be fewer possibilities of female community. Despite their college educations and in some cases, professional careers, most of the women are isolated and vulnerable. Yet here, a sense of community comes to play an important role in the plot. When she is locked in the basement morgue with her dead child, Willa Nedeed's emerging discovering of the suffering of her female predecessors in the house gives her strength to survive, accept herself, and take revenge on her husband. Furthermore the hope is more clearly developed in this novel that the sensitive black male, in the person of the poet Willie Mason, can begin to bridge the gap of understanding between men and women and to support women in their quest for identity.

In all three novels Naylor uses a unified physical setting, a spirit of place just as Gwendolyn Brook does in the Mecca and Toni Morrison in *Sula* to provide a communal framework for the varied descriptions of the women who come to live in it. Like Mecca tenement, "Brewster Place offers close physical contact that makes the women's confrontation with each other inescapable and their mutual support compelling." In *Linden Hills*, however, the women are physically isolated in houses and separated by status distinctions. The possibilities for sisterhood here are less spatial and contemporary than temporal and historical. No such

community of action closes the plot of *Linden Hills*, but a similar act of exorcism based on a sense of female community does take place. In this novel a variety of women characters again appears, but they rarely communicate with each other for mutual support. Among the minor characters are two older women, several respectable wives and mothers of middle age and several well educated young women of the third generation.

The second generation mothers of *Linden Hills* share an ambition for a better life. But they are not shown as coming together out of a fellow feeling and creating a genuine community. Like many of the men, they are out for themselves and their own families. The main character is Willa, the young wife of the current Luther Nedeed. She is presented initially as a total victim of her husband and as totally isolated. Many of the book is the story of Willa's gradual awakening to her position and to her power in a pattern reminiscent of slave narratives, as "Calvin Hernton illustrates in discussing *The Colour Purple*" (5). It comes about Mrs. Nedeed near death from grief and starvation, finds stored documents from three previous generations of Nedeed wives. Her contact with these women through their documents is a genuine if indirect experience of black sisterhood.

In *Linden Hills* Naylor offers a tour of the heaven to which the denizens of Brewster pray to ascend, and shows it to be a hell on earth presided over by the devil incarnate. Luther Nedeed whether he appears as the original Luther of the 1820s; a freedman who buys the steep, barren face of a plateau, sets up a mortician's shop at the very foot of it. The Second Luther, who expands the family estate and business, meanwhile grating virtually external lease to his neighbors. Later Luther shepherds an increasingly affluent community through the great depression. Finally, Luther of the 1980s rules the African American enclave of *Linden Hills*.

In *Linden Hills*, Gloria Naylor created an intimate portrait of a "Perverted Eden." In which upper middle class Blass discover that they have achieved wealth and success at the expense of their own history identity, that-they have sold their souls and are now living in a kind of spiritual hell. The great nieces of *Mama Day* are Willa Prescott Nedeed, who readers of *Linden Hills* will recall came to an ugly and ultimately end and Ophelia, the heroine of this novel, who is likewise threatened with early and disfiguring death.

Willie Mason an idealistic young African American poet who lives in a slum bordering the exclusive black neighborhood of *Linden Hills* and survives by working odd jobs. Willie left school after completing the ninth grade, believing that he needed to live among the people in order to write, and he takes pride in memorizing and reciting poetry. Willie is intelligent and widely read but rather naive and he questions whether he has chosen the right path in life. He joins his friend Lester to work in *Linden Hills* for Christmas money and discovers the terrible price that people must pay to live there. Willie determines that he will never become part of its soulless society.

Lester Tilson also twenty years old, a poet and dropout who live with his mother and sister in the first house in *Linden Hills*, a house of discord Lester's scorns the materialism of *Linden Hills*, yet he accepts its comforts. He serves as Willie's cynical guide and companion as they work their way street by street to the bottom of the Hills and the home of Luther Nedeed.

Luther Nedeed, a wealthy fifth generation mortician and head of the Tupelo Realty Corporation which owns all the land in *Linden Hills* and leases property for a thousand years and a day. He is a carbon copy of his fore fathers, all of whom were named Luther and were like him short, "Frog-Eyed" and very dark. A baleful and enigmatic figure, he seems to control life and death in the Hills. Ironically although he believes in the importance of family, he destroys many people, including his wife and son.

Willa Prescott Nedeed, Luther's wife, known only as Mrs. Nedeed until the final chapter. Unlike the earlier generations of nameless Nedeed wives selected for their pale skin, Willa is brown skinned. Like the others, however she exists only to produce a heir. When she gives birth to a pale son, Luther refuses to recognize him, though they are identical in all other respects. Eventually, he locks Willa and her son in the basement, where the child dies. At first Willa struggles to reclaim her identity and becomes a force with which to think.

Two journeys are at the heart of *Linden Hills*. The first is that of Willie Mason, living from hand to mouth, who fears becoming a forty year old grocery bagger. He wonders whether he has made a mistake and should follow the dream of material success. He welcomes a suggestion that he and Lester Tilson seek holiday jobs in *Linden Hills*, even though an ominous cry from the Hills chills him. What he finds there convinces him that he is doing the right thing, that in the Hills the wrong dream is followed.

At Lester's home, Willie learns that Mrs. Tilson's desire for money drove her husband to work two jobs until he died from a heart attack. Willie perceives the ill feeling within the Tilson home and recognizes Lester's hypocrisy when he mock his sister the next day, they find work at the wedding reception of Winston Alcott, who marries a woman he does not love because marriage is what Luther needed and *Linden Hills* expect. Only Willie recognizes that Winton's best man is also his former lover. Later, Willie stores at a centerfold of a black nude and is appalled because he sees exploitation, not sex, in the chains against which she struggles. Another man calls this photo an example of progress for African Americans: "Today penthouse... tomorrow the world."

At the home of a nervous widower, Willie and Lester are spirited upstairs to prepare the dead wife's room for a new bride, at the same time a wake is held downstairs at which the guests discuss the danger of a proposed low-income housing development too close to Linden Hills. Only Willie seems to understand the ghastly funeral dinner, at which guests devour "brown and bloody meat" that seems to represent the lives of the less fortunate. Hired to deliver supplies to the church where that dead woman will be buried. Willie realizes that the Reverend Hollis, a man who he has admired for years, is an alcoholic and a liar. After the funeral, Willie senses something unclean in the way Nedeed caresses the lid of the woman's coffin. Willie is the one who runs to the body of Laurel Dumont, who had dreamed of being the first African-American Olympia Swimmer but who instead commits suicide by diving into her empty pool. When Willie turns her over, she is faceless.

Plagued by nightmares that are a direct result of these enchanters, Willie struggles to put his experience into perspective. Finally, at Nedeed's home, where he and Lester are to trim the tree on Christmas Eve, Willie instinctively recognizes the missing Willa as she emerges from the basement carrying her dead child. When an accidental fire engulfs the house and its inhabitants, the people of Linden Hills stared at their windows to watch, but in spite of Willie's plea they refuse to help. Willie resolves to leave and never return.

Willie's physical journey parallels Willa Nedeed's psychological journey. She begins as a woman with no name or face, imprisoned without food or available water in a basement that was once a mortuary, her dead son in her arms. It is her cry of grief that Willie has heard. Ultimately, she looks for something with which to wrap her child's body. Searching through a trunk, she finds a faded wedding veil to shroud the child and she also finds the Bible of Luwana Packerville, the slave wife of the first Luther Nedeed from Luwana's writing on the black pages, Willa discovers that this woman, who had been purchased by her husband, had remained a slave even after their two-year old son had been freed. Willa identifies with Luwana's loneliness and anguish as she reads about how Luwana's child had been taught to abandon her.

Willa discovers the recipe books of Evelyn Creton Nedeed, so frustrated by her husband's coldness that she had mixed aphrodisiacs into his food, purged her with laxatives and committed suicide on Christmas Eve by eating ice cream laced with roach poison. Willa identifies with her emptiness as well. She finds Priscilla McGuire Nedeed's photo album and notes how the shadow of her young son gradually had grown to eclipse her face, until Priscilla's face in the photos had become only a blurred spot. Willa feels her own face and is surprised to find it there. She looks in a pan of water and sees herself mirrored. No longer has a faceless Nedeed wife, Willa remembered her name. She realizes that she willingly walked down the basement steps and that she can walk back up. She reclaims herself as the home maker and mother she is. She tidies the basement, still holding her child and then goes purposefully up the stairs. Willa has rediscovered herself, just as Willie has validated himself.

Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* presents an examination of the precarious struggle for African-American identity in the twentieth century. The novel concerned with an exploration of the middle class black

community of Linden Hills. It is the significant amount of its attention in which some African Americans disappear themselves as they try to be the same one. The novel has most of the contemporary inhabitants of Linden Hills as the educated and intelligent people who are aware of their culture and their identity, who have lived in the Civil Rights and the Black movements, but they are unable to create and respond to healthy ways of improve oneself. Naylor insists he small amount of American life and the corresponding of material success will be the many African Americans use, the yardsticks by evaluate self and others. The mythological American Dream is destructive to self and other, African American culture and their identity.

Naylor's strategy is different when she handles classic white area. In her novels of Date's inferno in *Linden Hills* she pays homage to this novel, but also revises and reshapes them. In *Linden Hills* Naylor undertake a whole revision of Date's inferno, but refer than reaffirming Christian morality, Naylor indicts middle class materialism and racism positioning at the center of her Dantesque hell Luther Nedeed. Such alienation which radically contrasts the strong network of female associations in *Mama Day* indicates what happens to mainland women deprived of a female community routed in an African life. They are exiled from the history, which in *Linden Hills* is told only in terms of male domination.

Naylor has said that her subject is always the lives of Afro-American, and in the women of Brewster place, she reaffirms the importance of female bonding. *Linden Hills* comments indirectly on the lack of and need for sisterhood by examining on upper-middle class. African American suburb in which women are largely exploited or invisible and in which men have, in the course of upward mobility, sacrificed their racial identity and their essence. Willie the sensitive protagonist expresses Naylor's hope that people do have choices in real life and that these choices matter.

## CONCLUSION

Some critics have praised Naylor for avoiding stereotypes and didacticism in this novel others have argued that she attempts to draw too many characters that cannot be fully explored, and that Willie and Lester, who are central to the novel are her weakest characters. Nevertheless, they have agreed that Naylor draws vivid-unforgettable minor characters. Her strongest characterizations are of Willa and the Vague Nedeed wives, who gradually come into focus through tangible reminders of their lives.

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