

'Cursed' Black Aspirants in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*

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Abstract: In the literary socio-cultural conventions Black women writers have resorted to assert, unprecedented definitions of women and alternative discourses of black womanhood. Gloria Naylor focuses the gender roles of women seen through the lens of female activities, experiences, goals, values, institutions, relationships and modes of communication in her novel *Linden Hills*.

Keywords: rife, ostracized, exorcism, sisterhood, octoroon, aphrodisiacs, epiphany, bondage.

African- American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by the writers of African descent. The genre traces its origins to the works of the writers of 18th century represented by Phillis Wheatley and Olaud Equiano. The tradition of African- American Literature has reached its high points with slave narratives and the writings of the Harlem Renaissance. It continues today with authors such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor and Walter Mosley being ranked among the top writers in the United States. The themes and issues explored in African- American literature are the contexts of African- Americans within the larger American Society and African- American culture, rife with racism, slavery and inequality.

A Black woman's voice for securing social equality is the major concern of Black women writers of the decades of Black literature where both gender consciousness and racial consciousness of blacks were made persistent. In the literary socio-cultural conventions Black women writers have resorted to assert, unprecedented definitions of women and alternative discourses of black womanhood. To quote Elizabeth Janeway in *Women's Literature*:

Black women writers have produced some items of the most items and revealing studies of the strains that a mulches including society puts on its members. History is always present in these books, fiction or no; and it is a history of daily inescapable assault by a world which allows so little room for a continuous coherent self to grow that one wonders how survival is possible at all. (Janeway 382)

All Women Novelists are the unacknowledged sociologists of the world who examine female experience and the conforming norms of society.

Gloria Naylor focuses the gender roles of women seen through the lens of female activities, experiences, goals, values, institutions, relationships and modes of communication in her novel *Linden Hills*.

Gloria Naylor's second novel *Linden Hills* deals with the black man's effort to realize his American dream. Linden Hills is the name of a place which is an intricately laid-out mini- universe, a housing development area handed down to Luther Nedeed since 1820 by the first Luther Nedeed, a man who purchased his freedom and went to the North to found Linden Hills. Luther Nedeed, who founded Linden Hills and its community, has a frightening history. After the first Luther Nedeed, each subsequent generation has a son named Luther who looks exactly like his father. Likewise, each generation marries a light-skinned woman who is immediately absorbed into the identity of Mrs. Nedeed. However, these wives were not allowed to mix freely with other families. The isolation of these wives reflects the life of all the residents of Linden Hills.

In *Linden Hills* she has given a moving account of the lives of white wives of "Nedeeds" who were constantly subjugated, marginalized and oppressed. These women often faced dual oppression as they were ostracized by their own races for their marriage to a Black man and by the Blacks. According to Neena Arora,

'Gloria Naylor' has articulated the anger, the rage and disappointment of Black women in her fictional works vociferously and vehemently. She explores the complexities and diversities of man woman relationship from new dimensions very vividly and depicts the female experience of oppression and exploitation in a male dominated Black society.(Arora 31)

In *Linden Hills*, an act of exorcism based on a sense of female community does take place. In this novel a variety of women characters do appear, but they rarely communicate with each other for mutual support. This paper attempts to trace the aspirations of the cursed Willa Prescott Nedeed the young wife of the current Luther Nedeed. She is presented initially as a total victim of her husband and as totally isolated. She makes her own journey through time as she discovers the history of the Nedeed women. Much of the book is the story of Willa's gradual awakening to her position and to her power. All of the Nedeed men except the last have married octoroon women, whose paleness of skin matched their paleness of spirit. Each wife bore her husband one black, frog like son, who was a physical and spiritual duplicate of the father all except for Willa Prescott Nedeed, who is dark skinned but bears a fair son. Nedeed considers the child a bastard and to punish his wife he locks her and the six year old boy in the morgue-basement of their home with a limited supply of cereal and water. The son, who is Nedeed's but carries the light-skinned genes of his

maternal ancestors, dies; but Willa survives. Due to lack of nourishing food though she feels dazed, roots through the papers and trunks in the basement that reveal to her the stories of the previous Nedeed women. Theirs is a tale of progressive depersonalization, as each husband became in turn more cruel and evil than his father. Willa suffers in this circle because she is a traitor. She has betrayed herself by willingly submerging her own identity in her husband's. She becomes his faceless counterpart and allows him to starve their son to death without really putting up a fight. Willa hopes that if she doesn't protest about Nedeed's murder of their son, Luther will want her to come out of the basement and bear him another child.

Willa, almost nearing death because of starvation, finds stored documents from three previous generations of Nedeed Wives in the morgue. Her contact with these women through their documents is a genuine if indirect experience of black sisterhood. One by one, she discovers the name and history of each of these women through a bible of Luwana Packerville a set of cookbooks of Evelyn Creton and a family photo album of Priscilla McGuire in sum a history of despair and madness, of a gradual loss of identity of each wife.

Willa's experience is similar to that of Luwana Packerville. When Luwana was kept in solitary confinement, in her growing insanity she had created a correspondence with a fictitious sister of the same name. As a slave she was purchased by Luther Nedeed and later married to him.

From the papers of Luwana Packerville, willa learns how enslavement by her husband causes Luwana to lose faith in God. Because Luwana's husband had bought her before he married her, she literally belonged to him. As Willa reads the journal of 1837, narrative of the original Mrs. Luther Nedeed, it reveals the usurpation of a women as a wife, mother, friend, and finally as a human being.

After Luwana Packerville's Bible journal, Willa discovers the history of the second Nedeed wife, Evelyn Creton Nedeed. Evelyn operates her world through the means of providing food. She understands Nedeed's sexual inadequacies which explain his coldness towards her. Evelyn's sexual frustration and self-hatred are expressed in an obsession with cooking. First she bakes huge meals in order to with her husband's attention, if not love. After that she uses small furtive doses of aphrodisiacs and the bulmic purgatives. When neither device yields any positive result, she finally starves herself to death by eating little and consuming large doses of laxatives and in the end she uses rat poison to kill herself on Christmas Eve.

Priscilla McGuire Nedeed, the third wife of Luther Nedeed, is more sophisticated, more aware and more artistic than either of her predecessors. She reveals her story through a photo album which traces

her deterioration from laughing, free and newly wed young woman to a mother increasingly held down by her son, who casts deeper and deeper shadows across her fate. She moves from being an enthusiastic woman with a strong sense of her own identity to a fading and finally absent presence. In the last photos, she has cut out or blotted out her face and in the empty space had written "me". In the beginning she affirms her own identity, freedom and sense of responsibility for her own life. And through a series of annual photographs demonstrates graphically how a previous Luther and his son gradually swallowed this spirited woman's selfhood until she began removing her face from all the pictures.

After these, Willa gradually becomes aware of her own situation. The final stage of regeneration is the rediscovery of her first name and the acceptance of what she had become, a good wife and mother in a limited circumstance: Willa Prescott Needed was alive, and she had made herself alive. Her marriage to Luther Needed was her choice and she took his name by choice as Willa Needed. Upstairs she had left an identity that was rightfully hers that she had worked hard to achieve. Many women wouldn't have chosen it, but she did it.

She journeys back upstairs, however, runs afoul of Luther, who intercepts her as she tries to clean the house with her dead child in her arms. Her act of self-affirmation instantly becomes an act of revenge: She claps Luther to her in a feral death grip and the three burn in the Christmas tree fire. There was no place in her universe to make sense out of the words, "My god, we're on fire" (300) Willa dies, sacrificing herself in the course of battling the text's symbol of an evil order. So the conclusion of Willa's journey to self-discovery is a dead end, but she has brought to an end the Nedeed dynasty. She has achieved selfhood and poetic justice with a strength derived from recognizing the accumulated suffering of the Nedeed Women. She is restored briefly to life and strength only through her recognition of a common bond with these other women. The power she achieves is hair-raising.

Here, the crucial events of December 24th, which occur during the novel's final chapter and yield on allegedly ambivalent and problematic ending, remain memorable to readers of the novel. It also reveals why Willa's death, which is both real and would not qualify, derogatorily, as "suicide" Naylor's narrator makes it clear that the Willa we see marching back upstairs, after her bereavement, banishment, and epiphany, is a woman who has been severely tortured, is possibly demented, but is also alert and determined to live and, unlike Laurel, rebuild her life.

Laurel Dumont's tragic story is the most developed among the minor women characters of *Linden Hills*. She has chosen, instead of the swimming and music she loves, a career as a top IBM executive and a high status marriage with the district attorney, Howard Dumont. Her

increasing emptiness leads her to divorce and withdraw from life. Unable to find her “home”, her place in life, she makes a last attempt to reach out for support from the other women. Since she has difficulty responding directly and openly to her grandmother, she tries to call Mrs. Nedeed, who however, has been locked in the “cellar morgue” by her husband. The direct supportive contact between the two women is never achieved. The combination of the snow and Luther Nedeed's reclaiming of her house, pushes her into committing suicide. 'She is like Count Ugolino in circle Nine of the Inferno, who, with his sons and grandsons, was imprisoned in a tower and starved. Unlike Ugolino, however, Willa ultimately finds salvation. “(as qtd in Ward, 190)

What saves Willa is what she learns about the previous Nedeed women from the homely records they have left behind in letters, diaries cookbooks, and photographs. 'Naylor implies that the history of women is found not in books and official archives but in the oral wisdom of a Roberta Johnson or a Grandmad Tilson and in the mundane records of women's daily lives.

Naylor has said that the treatment of the Nedeed women symbolizes the way that men have regarded women throughout history –as means of generation and have no value in themselves. As far as men are concerned, women have no history because they do not really exist. Now Naylor calls attention to that history.

It is important to revisit the novel's battle scene on December 24, Willa's death in the tradition of Black Women's activism and self-sacrifice and also she has put an end to the Nedeed dynasty.

In *Linden Hills* as in *Brewster Place* search for shared experience of Black womanhood is persistent. But unlike the *Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills* tells not about the realized sisterhood of black women in reality but the vague apparitions of women disappeared in the soluble matrices of time and generation. The futility of generation old struggle of women of Linden Hills is over come by the stamina of Willa Nedeed to end the saga of suffering of women at least of her lineage. Larry R. Andrews observes: “Willa Nedeed's emerging discovery of the suffering of her female predecessors in the house gives her strength to survive, accept herself and take revenge on her husband.” (Andrews 286)

Though the stronger elements of community of Black Women as emerged in *Brewster Place* is not here, in *Linden Hills* there is a similar act of exorcising the bondage of women into a female community is identifiable. Both the major and minor women characters of this novel in *Linden Hills*, are capable of linking the generations of mothers and daughters of Linden Hills. Willa Nedeed is especially presented as the victim of timeless rage of patriarchy the stored documents of three previous generations of Nedeed wives have come as a revelation about the grief and starvation of women of

her family. By the same documents she feels the experience of the same sisterhood. In *Linden Hills* Black Women's rediscovery of their self as Black Women self is Willa Nedeed's journey to self discovery. Thus her act of self affirmation which manifests as an act of revenge, she pushes Luther into the flames of death. Thus a kind of sisterhood has been established over time between Willa and her dead predecessors who haunt this house. Though she is deprived of her rights both racially and on the basis of gender, and "FALLS" in to the category of 'cursed', her aspiration and her will power To survive and find a solution to the problem raises her to the category of the "STRONG".

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