

Ramifications of Racial Identity in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills***Dr.S.Mahadevan**

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Abstract

This paper attempts to bring out the racial identity in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*. It presents the struggle for African-American identity; the idea of feminist consciousness is brought forward. There is a fight against racism. Women are found to be dominated, humiliated, and harassed by the male characters. The theme of tragic mulatto is introduced in the novel, reinforcing the importance of racial roots. *Linden Hills* portrays a sarcastic examination of the uncertain struggle for African-American identity in the nineteenth century and twentieth century. The relationship between personal identity and cultural history is the main theme in this novel. Naylor focuses on a community of heartless people who have become detached from their cultural past in the action of ascending the corporate ladder towards a promising monetary future. In this quest of upward mobility, the occupants of Linden Hills have even turned away from the sense of their racial identity.

Keywords: Race, Identity, Women, Roots

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In the fictionalization of the lives of women, Gloria Naylor pays close attention to the impact of Afro-American women on matters of race and sex in the latter half of the twentieth century. Naylor's major concern in her novels has been to give a different picture of the women in the society. She uses her writings as a means to dismantle the constructing walls of the traditional role of women. She uses the black women as a metaphor for all women and for that matter all people who are caught in the social trap and are known as stereotype. Naylor calls herself a wordsmith, a story teller. Her novels contain pieces of her personal life and familiar past in the forms of names, places, and even stories. Her novels are all 'linked' together.

Naylor's second novel, *Linden Hills* (1985), is concerned with an exploration of the fictional middle class black community in Linden Hills. Through this Gloria Naylor has tried to devote a significant amount of her attention in detailing the ways in which some African Americans efface themselves as they try to be both Americans and Afro- Americans. In this sense the novel records the specific consequences of W.E.B. Du Bois' ideas of double-consciousness. However, in the novel Gloria positions most of the contemporary inhabitants of Linden Hills as educated and intelligent people who are suppose to be aware of their culture and their black identity, who have lived through the Civil Rights and the Black Power Movements, but who are unable to create and respond to the healthy ways of seeing one-self effectively. Naylor insist that the very crumbs of American life and promise of material success will offer be the criteria that many Afro-Americans will use it as the yardsticks by which they will evaluate themselves and others, no matter that such an adherence to the mythological American dream is destructive to self, others and Afro-American culture and identity. In the most striking way Naylor captures the struggles for authentic Afro-American identity in her novel by focusing on the food which the characters consume and the rituals

and codes of conduct that surround its consumption. Naylor suggests that in order to understand the problems of African American identity food consumption is a viable way. For many characters in *Linden Hills*, the healthy Afro-American identity of its middle-class representation is as vaporous as the whiff of scent remaining after the consumption of expensive Cavivar.

Linden Hills is set during December in the fictional middle and upper class black community of Linden Hills in Wayne country, U.S.A., where people live down the hill. It is in the name of a place which is an intricately laid out mini-universe. It is a housing development area handed down to Luther Nedeed since 1820 by the first Luther Nedeed, the man who purchased his freedom and went to the North to find Linden Hills. The people who are wealthy, ironically, they are more spiritually and culturally malnourished. Luther Nedeed is the creator of the Linden Hills. He and his male progeny, all are named Luther Nedeed. After the first Luther Nedeed, each subsequent generation has a son named Luther who looks exactly like his father. Like this each generation marries a light skinned woman who is immediately absorbed into the identity of Mrs. Nedeed. They had a plan based on the first Nedeed's understanding that the future of Wayne Country - the future of America was going to be white; white money backing white wars for white power because the very earth was white. However, their wives were not allowed to mix freely with other families. The isolation of these wives reflects the life of the residents of Linden Hills. Luther separates himself from his community by his values, as well as by the moat he built around his house. The Nedeed succeed because they see the "White" in American future and they want Linden Hills to be "a beautiful black wad of spit right in the white eye of American" (9).

In their hatred, they lose right of their own values and the result is just as negative for them as their goal was for white American which has becomes spiritually degenerated in pursuit of materialism. While people buy into Linden Hills because they see it as a way of

changing America, Luther recognised that magician's supreme art is not of transformation but in making things disappear. Luther creates the Tupelo Realty Corporation as his way to have a share of the white money-pie, and his only problem.

That is, only those blacks, like the Nedeeds, who were comfortable with (or consciously unaware of) the idea of effacing themselves and their cultures to achieve material gains would qualify for admission to the privileged lots of Linden Hills. So it becomes clear throughout the book that Luther feels less concerned in transforming America than he does about trying to possess things. Moreover, because *Linden Hills* is not only about being black but about success, there is no God, only, "the will to possess". Thus the residents of Linden Hills are willing to disappear, lose their identity, for the sake of possessing material wealth. The current Luther Nedeed invited applications from anywhere in the country from. In order to explore the madness that lurks underneath these outwardly successful, upwardly mobile African-Americans Naylor presents two young men Letser Tilson, whose family lives at the top of Linden Hills but still in it, and Willie Mason, who lives in Putney Wayne, who lives in the economically poor black community of the city?

The two men have been friends since junior high school and both are poets this is central to Naylor's thematic concerns, for artists throughout history have pursued goals that are antimaterialistic. Furthermore, as poets, these young men are able to bring to Linden Hills an underperspective, one that is fully predicated on the human and that can recognize and evaluate the lost souls of Linden Hills. Both poets are out of work. It is by doing odd jobs for the residents of Linden Hills in the days before Christmas that these two men, especially the gifted, sensitive, and insightful Willie, are able to peep inside these people's lives who have "made it" and see the loss of Afro-American identity and humanity, which can easily be one of the payments for material success in America.

Maxwell Smyth, Laurel Tnmont, Winston Alcott, Xavier Donnel, Chester Parker and his wife, Lycentia, Reverend Michel, Hollis, Professor Daniel Braitheuaite live in Linden Hills and everybody is after his own piece of American dreams. Their ideal is Luther Nedeed and his values are their values and his lifestyle is their own lifestyle. Thus all of them are locked in their wrong choices. Naylor sees inside the vacuity of these people's lives through a parallel narrative that focuses on five generations of Nedeed women. One of the residents, Maxwell Smyth, is the highest ranking black executive at Genral Motors. All these characters live a stale life as they are guided by the philosophy of Nedeed.

Linden Hills centres around the theme of black men's oppression of black women. Luther Nedeed's philosophy of life established the rule for the generations that followed "Men are important, they control life and death. Women are one not important, they are owned, fed and forgotten. Nedeed never saw any women as human beings" (97). There are a variety of women characters in the novel who grow in isolation from each other. Among the minor characters there are two older women, several respectable wives and mothers of middle age and several well educated young women of rising 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. All of them are concerned with material wealth and status, with appearances but drive little human sustenance from each other. The young woman also tends to fare badly and remain detached from each other.

Linden Hills is the story of a black patriarch who fights against racism thinking that he is a demi-god who can rule the life of other inferior African Americans. He thinks women come last in the social hierarchy, he side tracks, neglects and tortures them believing that they have no role except bearing children and once she becomes a mother and gives an heir, her role in the world is over. Black woman for him is a child producing machine. The Nedeed

women have no women friends and do not have access to intimate knowledge of how other couples and other women function. They have no way to check or conform how unbalanced their own relationship is to their husband. A major strategy which the Nedeed men use is to maintain authority over their women so they keep them isolated from the community. They accomplish this mainly by using their class status. That is, because the Nedeed men are the wealthiest members of the black community, they and their wives are not fully participating members of the community at large. The life records of the Nedeed women show their wasting away under the authority of their husbands, even though these particular women had all of the material possession that mythically should insure their survival. The Nedeed women's life-stories though submerged and separate from the lives of other Linden Hills residents are actually identical to the fate awaiting all who embrace the Nedeed way to "get over" in America. Part of this way requires, as Barbara Christian, in "Naylor's Geography: Community, Class and Patriarchy in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*," puts it,

That the Linden Hills residents must erase essential parts of themselves if they are to stay in this jewel neighbourhood. Each of their lives has been damaged by the pursuit of wealth and power that Nedeed embodies ... They distort their natural inclinations, introducing death into their lives, even as the Nedeeds who make their money as funeral parlour directors, have distorted their families in order to create Linden Hill. (106)

Past and present reveal a trail of human destruction tied to the Nedeed ambition, passed from generation to generation and from designer house to designer house, to "get over." Most of the Linden Hills residents have sold their African American identity, indeed their very souls, for the grand illusions of material and for professional success. We find that the characters have been sold out for personal success because none of them have achieved anything that

might be considered “personal.” There is no success or triumph for any one of them neither intrinsic, subjective nor internal. In “*Gloria Naylor’s Linden Hills: A Modern Inferno*,” Catherine C. Ward sees *Linden Hills* as another version of Dante’s Inferno and thinks that Naylor presents us with a series of characters who indeed sacrifice the personal for the material. Ward writes,

In their single minded pursuit of upward mobility, the inhabitants of Linden Hills ... have turned away from their past and from their deepest sense of who they are. Naylor feels that the subject of who we are and what we are willing to give up of who-we-are-to get where we-want-to- go is a question of the highest seriousness-as serious as a Christian’s concern over his salvation. (67)

The food these characters eat and the activities and conditions associated with eating underscore their cultural and personal starvation. The characters who were never a part of Linden Hills, like Willie “White” Mason and Norman Anderson, or those who mentally or physically leave, it, like Lester Tilson, Kiswana Browne and Ruth Anderson (Norman’s wife) are the most psychologically and culturally healthy characters in the novel, they do not have money, cars, houses and all other material and dominant culture-determined signs of success. In *Linden Hills* the residents are empty shells underneath the material that glitter.

Naylor explores additional nuances of this cultural deprivation in her dissection of other residents of Linden Hills, and what they do or do not with food is central to one theme. The absence of positive Afro- American identity in the lives of characters is struggling “to make it.”

All the characters that live in Linden Hills or aspire to live there are presented as individuals who have lost all sense of who they are as Afro-Americans. They are usually highly educated, financially successful, and yet empty shells of human beings. They take no

pride in their cultural heritage; most of their efforts are spent in the deliberate removal of most vestiges of black cultural identity. In tracing past of this self-effacing process, Naylor shows that the first Nedeed even helped the confederacy during the Civil War and literary owned his wife Luwana. The first Nedeed put the dream of Linden Hills into operation. His sons carried out the dream and the many willing blacks like Xavier, Maxwell, Laurel, Roxanne Parker the Dumont's infinitum powder in the machine that continually perpetuated itself. At the end of the novel, Luther's wife Willie escapes from the basement prison, bums up Luther's house' Luther and herself. While the other Linden Hills residents "let it burn" (304). They do not even protect or value the lives of those like themselves. Only Willie and Lester remain as witnesses to the personal and cultural destruction that is Linder Hills, and only these two young black men and the blacks outside Linden Hills seem to know that eating barbecue ribs fried chicken and collard greens and drinking beer and cheap wine are intrinsically more important than a manicured lawn, an Olympic-sized pool, and an empty heart. Although Naylor does not suggest that the attainment of material success be avoided, she asks, "At what price?"

The presentation of memories in *Linden Hills* provides information, but gives no access to women who demonstrate strength or self-determination within neither marriage nor do they point to an escape. Willa has no means to return to the community. Her husband and a locked door stand as barriers between her and the rest of the world. Removed from the role of mother and wife Willia can now either die or succumb to the overwhelming pressure brought by her husband and suffer the fate like previous Nedeed wives. Willia's characterization is concluded with her physical death by fire, just as her mental health has been destroyed prior to her actual death. When she becomes conscious about her predicament she develops a black feminist consciousness. Consciousness means an understanding about what one is and what one could become Willa expects the life of a good black woman, but,

she fails in getting such a satisfactory life. As a result she prepares to destroy the very system responsible for the denial of her humanity and womanhood. She realizes that she is responsible for her life and that she is imprisoned not because of Luther but because of herself. Luther might have led her to the basement steps, but she has walked down herself, this knowledge gives her “strength” and “power.” Willia with firm determination tries to start her life again. It is through this Gloria Naylor projects black women’s predicament in America and delineates the way they become aware about themselves and their life.

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