

## **Ramification of the Anguished African American Community in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills***

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### **Abstract**

Slavery is a thing of the past for African Americans, and yet their past suffering might not be wiped out completely from their minds. The African Americans had begun to realise that they have to fix their roots in America even though they are Africans. They cannot return to Africa, their native land and America is their homeland. They are conscious about the fact that they are neither Americans nor Africans. Now they have a new identity as African Americans. With this new identity, they want to forget their ancestors' past lives as slaves and aspire to attain

social status in the American society. At present they have improved a lot and racial discrimination has been diminishing slowly. At the same time there appears class discrimination among the blacks. Gloria Naylor, in the novel *Linden Hills*, vividly describes the class distinction of black people, examining the fact that the class distinction results in losing their self-identity. This paper delves deep into the idea of how the aspiration of the African Americans to shine as an American, might end in the loss of their self-identity.

**Key Words:** Gloria Naylor, *Linden Hills*, Self-Identity, Racial Discrimination, Class Discrimination, African American, Social Status

### **Gloria Naylor**

The well-known, African American writer, Gloria Naylor was born on 25<sup>th</sup> of January, 1950 in New York City as the daughter of Roosevelt, the master framer, a telephone operator and Alberta Mcalpin Naylor. Naylor's writings are universally acknowledged, praised and earned a commercial success too. Her writings comprise of *The Women of Brewster Place*(1982), *Linden Hills*(1985), *Mama Day* (1988), *Bailey's Café* (1992), *Children of the Night: The Best Short stories by Black writers, 1967 to the present* [editor,1995] and *The Men of Brewster place* (1998) and 1996 (2005). Most of her novels are in a way related and relevant with one another. It highlights the black community with their own colours, flavours and shades. Her accreditations include an American Book Award for first fiction(1983), a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1985), the Candace Award of the National coalition of One hundred Black women (1986), a Guggenheim Fellowship(1988) and the Lillian Smith Award (1989). She died on 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2016.

### **The Formation of Linden Hills**

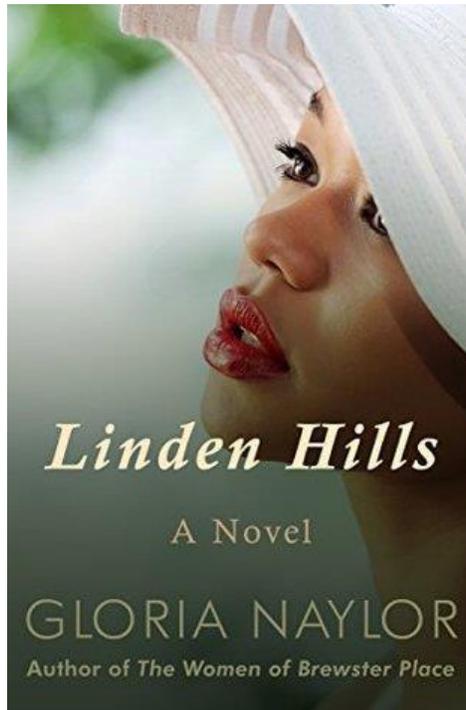
Linden Hills, the v-shaped land bordered Putney Wayne's fields, sloping down a rock of bushes and linden trees, and curved through the graveyard and ended before Patterson's apple orchard as a sharp point. The whites saved a lot of money by selling the worthless land to Luther Nedeed in 1820. They expected him to return the land as he might be afraid to live near the graveyard. They believed that he would fight against death or starving since the land wasn't

suitable for farming. But Nedeed shattered their expectations, survived there and surprised everyone. He built a cabin of two rooms at the bottom of the hill and after seven days of deep thought, he planned to survive there. He bought a wagon and a box of horses and took the undertaker business knowing that the whites would never mind if they were buried near the blacks. Then he built shacks up on the hill from first to fifth crescent drive and the poor blacks start coming to live there. Nedeed stayed down in Linden Hills and he got money from renting the shacks to poor blacks. The people live along the eight curved roads starting from first crescent drive to fifth crescent drive and then the three roads connectively labelled as Tupelo Drive, which ends in Luther Nedeed's house. The Nedeeds live through five generations in the same hills heading the whole community, doing the same business and collecting the rent correctly on the first of every month. Thus they gradually become the wealthiest black people in Linden Hills. Nedeed's son reminds us of his father's words, "Let' em think as they want; let'em say as they want - black or white. Just sit right here and they'll make you a rich man through the two things they'll all have to do: live and die". (LH 6)

On seeing the growing land value, the municipal government and the real estate developers, want to buy it. Nedeed's son wants to save the land from them, because he wants Linden Hills to be of black people only. He understands the future of America, "It was going to be white: white money backing wars for white power because the very earth was white-look at it -white gold, white silver, white coal running white railroads and steamships, white oil fueling white automotives." (LH 8) In order to save his land, he decides to lease it to the poor blacks for a thousand year and a day, providing on condition that the blacks should pass their land only to their children. If they want to sell their land, they have to sell it only to a black family. If they fail to keep this condition, the land will be given back to his family. Thus Nedeed wishes to create a black community in the midst of whites and decides,

Linden Hills had to be a showcase. He had to turn it into a jewel-an ebony jewel that reflected the soul of Wayne County but reflected it black. Let them see the marble and brick, the fast and sleek, yes and all those crumbs of power they uniformed their sons to die for, magnified tenfold and shining bright- so bright

that it would spawn dreams of dark kings with dark counselors leading dark armies against the white god... (LH 9-10)



### **Tupelo Realty Corporation**

Considering all these things in his mind, he visits all the houses in Linden Hills along with his son. He wonders on seeing the progress of Linden Hills as the people begin to clean fences, improve their houses for the future generations. Hence, he intends to create Tupelo Realty Corporation to finance, construct and sell to private sectors. Many black people get investment on thousand years and a day lease through this corporation to develop their houses. Needed assumes that those who know well that they have to survive only in America and they couldn't return to Africa, will create a true black power in Linden Hills. He sends away the people from Linden Hills through some tricks if he considers them as unwanted tenants. Gradually Linden Hills becomes a developed space to the eyes of both blacks and whites.

After the development, Linden Hills is 'the most wanted name' among the blacks and whites. So, everyone wants to get a space in Linden Hills and after that, aims to progress towards

Tupelo drive and Linden Hills becomes “a place where people had worked hard, fought hard, and saved hard for the privilege to rest in the soft shadows of those heart-shaped trees”. (LH 15) Hence, many people send applications to Tupelo Realty Corporation every year to get a space in Linden Hills. The list includes Putney Wayne people, whites and even the Caribbeans. Later, the dream of creating a powerful black community is slowly demolished and the black community travels to gain materialistic success.

Nedeed’s Tupelo Realty Corporation is conscientious of selecting the applications from Baptist ministers, political activists and Ivy League graduates as they have more opportunity to gain materialistic prosperity and they will reach the bottom quickly leaving space for the newcomers at the top. Nobody knows what happens to the bottom residents as they soon disappear and no one questions the available space at Linden Hills mostly. The residents of Linden Hills strongly believe that “The Nedeeds had made a history there and it spoke loudly of what blacks could do. They were never leaving Linden Hills. There was so much to be gotten. Surely, in a millennium their children could move down or even marry down the hill toward Tupelo Drive and Luther Nedeed”. (LH 16) In such a way, Linden Hills could return to be a black community aspiring to grow rich and to live the luxurious life of the whites. The people become robotic to come to the top of Linden Hills first and aim to earn money and to get a space at the bottom quickly. In this search of material success, they desire to get education, a good job and handful of money and as a result they live their lives mechanically and atlast they lose their uniqueness resulting in the loss of their identity. In short, they want to be whites and intend to live the life of the whites and surely they achieve their goal representing their betterment of life. Naylor meticulously depicts the transforming life of the African Americans of Linden Hills as, “They eat, sleep and breathe for one thing- making it”.(LH 39) Hence, they concentrate on only one thing, that is ‘making their own life as a prosperous one’ and everyone is proud to live in Linden Hills.

## **Community**

The people of Linden Hills become more materialistic and they lack something in their life. They forget their African American identity and they desire to live an American way of live

ending in selling their souls for material success. Most of the people in Linden Hills have lost their happiness in order to gain wealth. Naylor, in an interview with Angels Carabi, points out how the lives of African Americans change when they attain social status in American society: “They first lose family ties, because if you work for a big corporation you may have grown up in Detroit but may end up living in Houston. Then there are the community ties. You can create a whole different type of community around you—mostly of a mixture of other professional, middle-class people— but you lose the ties with your spiritual or religious values. And ultimately, the strongest and most difficult ties to let go of are your ties with your ethnocentric sense of self. You forget what it means to be an African American. Black Americans with a higher social status, often have to confront issues of racism without the things that have historically supported the working class; like the family, the community, the church or just their own sense of self”. (121) The people living in first to fifth drives of Linden Hills lose their familial ties, then the communal ties, then the spiritual or religious ties and at last lose their selfhood.

### **The Inhabitants of Linden Hills**

In Linden Hills, the first to fifth crescent drives are occupied by the poor and middle class people like Ruth, Mrs. Tilson’s family. Tupelo Drive is occupied by wealthy people like Laurel Tilson, Dr. Braithwaite and Luther Nedeed. The two friends, Willie Mason and Lester Tilson, do some jobs to earn some money for Christmas in the houses of the inhabitants of Linden Hills, moving from the upper area to the lower area of Linden Hills. Their move also makes them to move closer to the residents and they understand the inner conflicts, the loss of the soul of the people besides making a life in Linden Hills. There exists a large gap between the rich people and poor people. In the words of Theresa Goddu, Gloria Naylor “counterposes an autobiographical or poetic ‘subjective’ approach to history to the willed amnesia of the Black middle class, the ‘mystic’ ahistoricist pretensions of Patriarchy, and the ‘objective’ history of the white male historians.” (Qtd in Bharati)

### **The Poor Ruth and Norman**

Norman and his wife Ruth are poor, yet they live a comfortable life there. Their poverty is a well-known thing in Wayne Avenue, “people said that if Norman brought home air, Ruth

would make gravy, pour it over it, and tell him not to bring so much the next time”. (LH 32) When Norman invites Willie and Lester to his home, Lester mocks him by asking if they have two more cups to serve for them. Even though they are poor, they welcome them in a nice manner. Their home is very simple with limited furniture. Norman insists that after getting some money, he intends to apply for a home in Linden Hills. Ruth opposes him as she has lived there for six months with the unreal folks. She has no interest to move towards Linden Hills. Through this, it is clearly evident that the residents of Linden Hills are unhappy.

### **The Longing of Mrs.Tilson**

According to the information given by Ruth, Lester and Wilson want to do some job for Mrs.Donnell of third crescent drive. Before that, Lester invites Willie to stay a night with him in his house. Willie witnesses a huge difference when he visits Lester’s home. He finds no warmth in the welcoming manner of Mrs.Tilson, the mother of Lester. Tilson’s family lives in the first home of crescent drive of Linden Hills. It appears to be a small house of iron fences and everything in the home is in green colour, Mrs. Tilson’s favourite colour. Mrs. Tilson is proud to live in Linden Hills eventhough she may get a large home in Putney Wayne. Mrs.Tilson never accepts Willie as Lester’s friend since he is poor. Yet she receives him to reveal her social behaviour. When Lester enquires about dinner, she says, “Well, I guess we can always find more, and especially for such a good friend of Lester’s”. (LH 48) It shows her pride in saying that they have something good to offer Willie as they are better folks. She further says, “But we’re eating like peasants tonight-just fried chicken”. (LH 48) Due to getting her social recognition, Mrs.Tilson behaves artificially and her speech denotes her pride of being better folk always. In order to host Willie, Mrs.Tilson arranges the dining table with china, silverware, linen napkins and Norwegian crystal and then offers him meal to eat. When Roxanne, the sister of Lester fights with him, Mrs.Tilson controls them, “Lester, Roxanne, please, not in front of company” (LH 55) and “...Willie is our guest. And only the crudest of people are rude to their dinner guests”. (LH 56) She further alerts, “Now Willie’s going to think we’re a group of barbarians in this house”. (LH 55) All these words denote that Mrs.Tilson wants to maintain her social status all the time, especially before a guest. And she doesn’t really scold Roxanne for being rude, but scolds her that she is doing all that in front of a guest, spoiling their reputation.

Willie receives a warm welcome and a cup of coffee with love in the poor Norman's house, but he feels embarrassed in Mrs.Tilson's home although he has good food to eat.

### **Roxanne Tilson's Aspiration**

Roxanne Tilson, the daughter of Mrs.Tilson also has aspirations to move up in life like her mother. Her one and only determination is to marry a well settled black man. She is twenty-seven and a little bit fat. She works in an ad agency after completing her B.A. She wants to marry a black man who runs along with the whites to gain social status. Among the minority of those black men, she has chosen Xavier Donell, the vice president of minority marketing at General Motors. Her mother too approves him for the only reason that he lives in Third crescent drive of Linden Hills. In short, Roxanne is a typical African American woman, who wants to root herself strongly in the American soil.

### **The Dejection of Lester Tilson**

Lester Tilson, the son of Mrs.Tilson, is aware of his community losing their identity slowly in search of material prospects. Lester also thinks that his mother merely kills his father by urging him to acquire more money by working two jobs with a bad heart condition. He reminds us of her mother asking not to disturb his father to play with him while he was sleeping. But she woke him to go for the job so early. His father slept only for four hours a day for ten years and he died soon. The reason behind her mother's urge was that somebody finished their basement and set his daughter to Brandeis. The materialistic requirement made her mother to kill his father by pushing him to do extra work. Lester rightly comments, "...I'll never be like my old man. No woman's gonna hound me into the grave so she can weep over it in imported handkerchiefs". (LH 52) Thus, Lester Tilson wants to hold his identity. Lester is good at writing poems and he wishes to become a poet, but his mother stops him. She reminds him that poetry can't help in supporting a family. She tells if he continues to write poems, he will make her home to be sold to somebody else. But Lester dislikes that home and protests, "This is home, a house with a thousand-year-and-a day lease. I hate it, but I eat well and my laundry's done for me and my Tv's fixed when the colour fades..."(LH 58) Thus he knows very well that in order to live

in that home, he too sells his desire and aspiration, affirming that he comments, "...I've sold myself for a pair of clean socks and a chicken dinner". (LH 59)

### **Xavier Donnell and Maxwell Smyth**

Xavier Donnell and Maxwell Smyth, the graduates of black Ivy League ran the race along with the whites;so they are termed as successful Niggers. Maxwell Smith has changed his name to SMYTH, by that he starts to forget his blackness and wants to be a white person all the time. He has been an A average student in college, attentive in the class, student government's leader, school newspaper and year-book editor. In Short, he has been 'a super nigger' all the time. He manages to sleep for three hours to attain his goal. Many white students are his friends. Due to his caliber, he has the experience of being a regional sales representative, business manager, vice president for consumer affairs. He rises to the position of assistant to the executive director. He wants to attain the post of an executive director, which is usually reserved for the whites. He advises Xavier to withdraw his desire to marry Roxanne as girls like her after getting education, expect a lot from him. He shares his views on the educated black woman as, "They're hungry and they're climbers, Xavier, with an advanced degree in expectations. Hook up with one of them and whatever you're doing isn't good enough, and you're doing damned good as it is". (LH 109-110) He advises Xavier to achieve a lot as a super Nigger and to leave the desire of marrying Roxanne. Naylor aptly comments on the loss of African American identity in Maxwell as, "In short, his entire life became a race against the natural-and he was winning". (LH 104)

### **Winston Alcott**

Winston Alcott is a gay and has a relationship with David for many years. On account of his getting a promotion in his law firm and to move up in life by moving down to Tupelo Drive, he has decided to marry a woman. In Linden Hills, marriages happen on social status and Winston's marriage happens without any love and it is artificial. While Winston refuses to marry, his father advises, "You're already living in Linden Hills. I could never dream of that when I was your age. Sure, worse comes to worst; ...don't throw away a chance to be a corporate lawyer with a firm like that because of...well, because you're young and can't really see what it might mean later". (LH 77-78) His father's intention is to move him up in life by marrying a

girl. As a present to his decision he receives a mortgage on Tupelo Drive from Nedeed's Tupelo Realty Corporation.

### **Laurel Dumont's Suicide**

Laurel Dumont, the privileged Tupelo Drive inhabitant, searches for her identity, her true self, throughout her life. Finding emptiness in her life, she empties her life. She is a privileged, rich woman in the eyes of the people of Linden Hills, but actually she lives an unhappy life. That emptiness of her world ruins her life at last. But, in search of material prospects, she withdraws her passion in swimming. She is educated at the California University, continues her career as an executive in IBM, and marries Howard, the first black D.A in Wayne County and the future Attorney General. She marries as per the wish of her family members. Howard has a house in Tupelo Drive, which is a large house of four bedrooms. She feels that she has no home in Georgia, Cleveland or California. She clings to music and water, the two things she loved in her life, but it is now "...too cold to swim and the music got so loud it was deafening". (LH 233) Roberta, the grandmother of Laurel, visits Tupelo Drive to support Laurel who identifies, "I guess what folks say is true then. It's lonely at the top" (LH 236) and Laurel finds it as "damned lonely".(LH 236) Roberta reminds her that Georgia is not her home, when Laurel tells her that she feels at home in Georgia. She advises her to find peace at Tupelo Drive, her home. Laurel wishes to redo all things that happened in life. She wants to be affectionate towards her father, Claudia, her step mother and her husband and rides away her loneliness. She tries to accept Tupelo Drive as her home but the emptiness terrifies her, "And she sat up in bed at night in the silent house and wondered why it wasn't enough. The weight pressed down on her noticeably then, growing heavier each evening as she paced her room, hoping to relieve it so she could breathe. If she lay down with it, she knew she would suffocate and she feared dying in her sleep".(LH 239) This dispute still increases her terror and perplexes her. At last she ends her life by diving into an empty pool, ending her chaos too. Laurel aspires to participate in Olympic swimming competition, but she chooses a career after throwing away her aspiration. She is deceived by her marriage finding her life a futile one. She wants to correct her mistakes but doesn't know where to start. Laurel Dumont, owing to the mechanical way of living, loses her identity.

## **Luther Nedeed**

Nedeed, owing to a desire to separate himself from the other residents of Linden Hills, Tupelo Drive and Wayne Avenue, has made an artificial lake of twenty yards around his house and ground. Moreover, marsh weeds, catfish and ducks have filled the lake. A bridge at the back of the house connects his house to the lake. Thus he shows that he is better than the other residents of Linden Hills. When Nedeed's house is on fire, nobody comes to rescue him. The community has become so selfish and does not have the humanistic attitude.

## **Dr. Braithwaite**

The observer and the passive reactor of Tupelo Drive is Dr. Braithwaite, the historian. Luther Nedeed's grandfather helped Braithwaite in acquiring the education and he became a historian. He asked him to record all about Linden Hills and allowed him access the family records, Survey reports, Tupelo Realty corporation's official papers, and original bills. So far, he wrote eleven volumes on the history of Linden Hills. It had all the records of the people of Linden Hills. His sixth volume was considered for Nobel prize. He is now working on the twelfth volumes and identifies the drastic change among people and he observes, "People are going to come and live in Linden Hills regardless of what I or anyone else does". (LH 262) He also tells to Willie that he has mingled among the people, yet is detached from them. He even knows the reason for the death of Laurel, but he doesn't react to it. He says that Laurel fights valiantly in the battle of survival, but she loses. His words rightly echo the tragedy that is being faced by the community, "...that personal tragedy today was just a minute part of a greater tragedy that has afflicted this community for decades". (LH 257) Naylor has rightly concluded the tragic end of community through Braithwaite.

## **Conclusion**

The first Luther Nedeed dreamed of getting black power in Linden hills. That dream is continued by his sons and the aspiring black folks including Xavier, Maxwell and the Tupelo Drive residents. But in their aspiration, they lose their self and in search of the material prospects, they lose their individual significance. In trying to be an American, they forget their African heritage, and they lose their humanity too. They have no true love and that's why they

don't care about the neighbours. They miss saving the life of their leader, as they are selfish. In short, Naylor hopes to proclaim that material prospects are essential to attain black power, but it shouldn't denigrate the black power and culture. She rightly criticizes the growing Afro-American community falling as a prey into another form of slavery, claiming that they have come out of slavery. In search of material prospects, they have created class distinctions too. If black power should be attained, they must be united and they must have humanistic concern. This novel rightly knocks at the growing African American dream, which may push them into a hellish life. Naylor provides a warning to her community through this novel and advises them to stick with their African American identity and to give reverence to their past.

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