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Linden Hills: Saga of Undiluted Suffering

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Abstract---Linden Hills by Gloria Naylor marks psychological fragmentation which results into immense pain and suffering. Naylor, in this novel, addresses the physical and mental hierarchies which act as blockades in the higher purpose of human integration. This paper aims to investigate the saga of undiluted suffering in the lives of women in Linden Hills. The novelist shows in true colors how the black women become sacrificial lambs and receive the brunt of the frustration of the black males of their society. This paper is also a close study of black males mentality when they get unbridled power and exert it on all those who are subversive to them. Women become the easy victim of their ruthless power play. The tragedy is more intense because the women have been suffering for many generations. In every generation, Needed male marries a light-complexioned woman just to reduce her to a child-bearing tool. Failing that, the woman has to lead a life full of hardships and depravity. This paper analyses how her loud desires to stand against the institutionalized trauma herald a new era of freedom from pain and suffering.

Keywords---depravity, human, integration, subversive, undiluted suffering.

Introduction

Suffering in an Afro-American society becomes more intense when it does not arise as much from the racial supremacy as much it is inflicted by the people of same color and community. *Linden Hills* by Gloria Naylor is, indeed, an account of absolute suffering inflicted by the blacks on the blacks. When the victims are black women, the perpetrators are either the white or the black men. Gloria Naylor in this novel shows that it is black, not the white men who have posed challenged to the individuality of the black women. This paper investigates the tale of suffering in Naylor's women characters in *Linden Hills* (Reinhard et al., 2013; Welner et al., 2018).

The base of Linden Hills was laid down by the first Luther Nedeed. He had purchased the land in 1820 and then rented roughly- built huts or cabins only to Blacks who were very poor. It so happened that the most wealthy and rich Blacks

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were placed at the bottom of Linden Hills. Shirley Anne Williams says, “at the bottom of Linden Hills where the most opulent homes are (Naylor plays on the black idiomatic sense of ‘down’) the seat of the successive generations of the dark skinned “satanic” Luther Nedeed”. The successive Luther Nedeeds get on richer and richer and subsequently more and more powerful. Each succeeding Luther Nedeed follows his father and marries an 'Octoroon' bride to continue the family and keeps on heading over the increasingly rich Linden Hills of his own times (Faber et al., 1993; Skorupski et al., 2006).

The whole setting is on Linden Hills and the owner or the developer is the mysterious Nedeed family. Linden Hills is an upper middle class black community which is striving to carve a niche for itself in the American society. The Nedeed family has a horrifying history. After establishment of Linden Hills by the first Luther Nedeed, each following generation has a son named Luther only, who is an exact replica or copy of his father (Kukreja, 2016; Ranveer, 1995; Ward & Naylor, 1987). Similarly, each successive Luther marries a girl who is light skinned and thereafter she immediately loses her identity and is known only by the name Mrs. Nedeed. Unfortunately all these ladies who marry Luther Nedeed are forced to abandon their identities and they just become son- bearing machines. Ranveer Kashinath affirms, “However their wives are not allowed to mix freely with other families and it reflects the life of all the residents of Linden Hills”. The untold sufferings of these women have been presented in a moving manner (Cooper et al., 1994; Moore et al., 2000).

With the passage of time the Old Town develops into a modern young city and Linden Hills also evolves into a premium Township. Nedeed takes full advantage of the situation and he marks the entire Hill from 'First Crescent Drive' to Fifth Crescent Drive' selling the lands to the black inhabitants who are already living there in shacks. He does not actually sell the land but leases it for 1000 years and 1 day and laying further restrictions that they could sell it only to another black family (Toombs, 1993; Ward & Naylor, 1987). The same proposal is extended to tenants living along Tupelo Drive. Everyone is agonized at the conduct of Nedeeds but no one has any other choice. Margaret Whitt sums up, “The government and real estate developers, other than Luther himself, of course, were clearly seen as the white enemy”. In the novel the third Luther is the lynch pin as he conjoins and connects his grand- father and father to the fourth Luther who is his son. The fourth Luther had to face the Great Depression in 1929. He gets rid of the problematic tenants by buying back their property or tricking them out of their lease agreements. Grandmother Tilson proves a match for him and rebukes, “So take your frog-eyed self and your frog-eyed son out of here. And I know your evil ways – all of you” (Caves & Bradburd, 1988; Perry, 1989).

The fourth Luther also gets married and within a year of his marriage he becomes father. Strangely, his son is white and so, for the first five years, Luther keeps on resenting his son and does not even name him. He doubts his wife’s loyalty and is certain that the white child is not his son. So he locks his wife and the boy in the basement of the house. “He wanted to know her why, she had been brought to Tupelo Drive, Nedeeds home?”. Tragically, the son dies here due to suffocation and Willa Nedeed comes to know about the real family in which she had married. Nina Arora comments, “Willa learns A lot about the history of these

socially highly respected Nedeed men almost all the Nedeed women died in exile or in seclusion unseen and unheard by the neighbours". The suffering of Willa is unparalleled and to add to her agony she also loses her son. In her exile she also learns about the painful existence of her preceding Needed wives ([Prout & Howitt, 2009](#); [Kuhn, 2019](#)).

Willa Nedeed keeps on suffering in the basement, her son has expired and at the height of her total grief, she finds the strength to take revenge from her husband. In her confinement she finds Luwana's letters who is the first Mrs. Nedeed. She is awestruck by the similarity of their tales, how their loneliness and suffering are identical. Then she came to know of the story of Evelyn Creton Needed through her cooking books and recipes which also point out the same saga of suffering and non existence. She studies these notes, recipes and photos collections very minutely. During her imprisonment Willa travels from 1830s to the present time of 1980s. This history of 150 years of her ancestors- in law is a revelation in the sense that all of them share a common legacy. Catherine Ward elaborates, "The treatment of the Nedeed Women symbolises the way that men have regarded woman throughout history as means of generation that have no value in themselves. As far as men are concerned, women have no history because they do not really exist" ([Xiu & Xeauiyin, 2018](#); [Titko et al., 2021](#)).

Willa is now full of agony and frustration. Christmas is approaching and everyone is full of festive spirits. Even Luther Nedeed also has second thoughts about the manner in which he has dealt with his wife. He even goes to the extent of thinking that his father would have acted differently in similar circumstances. He is also saddened with the death of his son, so he oscillates between self pity and anger. On the Christmas Eve, Luther employs Willie and Lester for doing petty work. Luther asks them to decorate the Christmas tree by using candles. In the basement, Willa is preparing for her upwards journey that might liberate her from all sufferings. Systematically, she packs the old books, clothes and photo album and then she picks the dead body of her son. She is full of grief because her son never had any chance to live; he always wanted to know why his father neglected him? She recollects how Luther was not even, interested in giving him any name, "His father had said that he didn't care what she called him, so she had taught him to spell Sinclair". Willa cleans the basement area before her upward journey and also plans to clean other areas in the house, here cleaning symbolises the cleansing of all the wrongs and mistakes that were hitherto committed in Nedeed's house. This again is her attempt towards breaking the shackles of Patriarchal Power in Nedeed's family or at the macro level in the entire female black fraternity ([Whitt, 1999](#); [Naylor, 1993](#); [Wilson, 2001](#)).

Willa begins her ascent on the concrete steps and approaches the door of her freedom. At the same moment Willie also accidentally reaches the door from the other side and opens it. He is aghast to see the wretched, pathetic figure of Willa Nedeed holding something like a kid in her lap; she enters the prohibited zone of Luther's house and declares, "Luther your son is dead". Luther who was taken aback by her sudden appearance does not want Lester and Willie to be a part or witness of this unforeseen development. On their part, Lester and Willie are also puzzled and, "They neither touched nor spoke as the wind shrieked between them, carrying the silent questions behind their widening eyes". It is due to this

new found spirit within her that when Luther blocks her path, she takes it as a challenge and strikes him. In this scuffle the cloth covering the dead kid catches fire and all three of them die in the ensuing inferno. Thus in this novel Gloria Naylor has depicted the sufferings of black woman in a vivid manner. Willa Prescott, Laurel Dumont, Ruth and the three Nedeed wives before Willa all suffer intensely. They are merely stooges in the male dominated patriarchal society. It is through Willa's imprisonment that Naylor divulges the sufferings of earlier Nedeed wives. The imprisonment of Nedeed wives in the basement is a live symbol of slavery under the patriarchal system of domination practised by the Luther Nedeeds of Linden Hills. The entire lady Nedeeds lived under similar conditions. It is only the last Nedeed wife Willa who tells the readers about the sufferings and oppression of herself and her ancestors (Kebaituli, 2021; Udu et al., 2016).

On comparing the last of Nedeed wife Willa with her three ancestors, it becomes clear that her suffering is more acute and heavier as she is burdened with the dead body of her son and her own decaying body and spirits. The three others had vented out their feelings but Willa does no such thing, she rises against all odds and ensures that in future no other girl or lady would have to suffer like her or her mother-in-law, and once and for all she destroys the Nedeed house and the only surviving Nedeed male. The lease agreement lay down that no black woman would be eligible to inherit the house in case the male died before her. This also is a major cause of their sufferings in the novel. Ruth former Hills resident is married to Norman who suffers from emotional wreckages. They love each other intensely but Ruth suffers because of her husband's suffering and instability. The marriage of Ruth and Norman is a perfect foil to the marriage of Luther and Willa Nedeed. Ruth and Norman are poor and unstable but still they are committed to one another, on the other hand Luther and Willa have no financial constraints but live a wretched life as married couple (Zong & Zhen, 2021; Nyandra et al., 2018).

Another important female character is that of Laurel Johnson Dumont who is actually a link between Ruth Anderson and Willa Prescott Nedeed. Her story is a kind of motivation for all the black women because she appears to have realized every childhood dream of hers. Initially, she was afraid of water but then with the motivation of her grandmother Roberta, she becomes a champion swimmer. However, her suicide leaves everybody surprised and Lester and Willie fail to understand what must have forced Laurel to give up her life? Charles E. Wilson remarks, "Laurel's tragic end exposes the potential horrors that await anyone who lives in Linden Hills". Laurel might have taken this drastic step as Luther had told her to vacate the house. It is a fact that Linden Hills is a heartless and callous society but it destroys the fair sex more than the men. It may even be said that the subjugation of all women who are married into the households of the Hills builds the foundation of the rich community inhabiting the Linden Hills. It is also an accepted fact that the history of humanity is replete with subjugation of women, whatsoever section of the society they may belong to. Toombs affirms, "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".

It is easily conspicuous that in the Afro-American culture the slave women were exploited two fold, firstly as productive labour and secondly as reproductive labour. As a productive labour she carried out all the domestic works and outside chores, then as a reproductive Labour she acted as a sex machine to give pleasure to her master and if it was a Nedeed then give him a son or successor to continue his family. Naylor has successfully shown that in Nedeed family of Linden Hills, the slavery continued and flourished even in the post slavery era. They are only needed for producing sons and thereafter discarded as dustbins. Philosophers and thinkers alike argue that women's reproductive capacity and her body structure is the root cause of her exploitation and suffering. Jane Freedman says, "Women's reproductive capacity and their weakened physical condition are being reinforced by men's development of social structure that keeps women tied to their reproductive role. In this way, Gloria Naylor is successful in portraying the sufferings and agonies of the black women particularly the Nedeed wives. They have to fight for their honour and dignity and above all for their identity. Ultimately they destroy the power play and discourage tyrant to play more with the innocent beings.

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