

**DISCOVERY OF SELF IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *LINDEN HILLS***

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**Abstract**

*Gloria Naylor is one of the distinguished African-American novelists. Besides, she is a major voice in the group of Afro-American female writers after Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Through her novels, she has delineated the search of black females for their identity. In this direction, she has made her second literary attempt by publishing *Linden Hills* which portrays the diverse experiences of upper middle class black women in a hostile environment of their gender oppression that arises a conflict making them aware of their power and self-identity which is best exemplified through the character of Willa Prescott Nedeed. The present research paper intends to explore the question of self identity through the projection of the life journey of Willa from innocence to self- realization and the depiction of past remnants that serve as a redemptive force in Gloria Naylor's novel *Linden Hills*.*

**Keywords:** discovery, conflict, self-identity, gender oppression, redemption

**Introduction:**

Gloria Naylor is one of the distinguished African-American novelists. Besides, she is known as an essayist, screenplay writer, columnist and educationist. Through her novels, she has portrayed the aspects of a female identity. She treats women more as an individuals. In this respect, she has observed the Afro-American literary tradition in the truest sense and competently explored the world of black female experience. Her second novel *Linden Hills* too explores the world of upper middle class black women who severely undergoes through

the gender oppression in the hands of their black men who are mad in the pursuit of their 'American Dream' which is based upon materialism and having no concern for human ethics. In the pursuit of this 'American Dream', as women have inferior role to play, black men crushed them under their feet after producing an heir to them. It is meant that she has been denied her identity as a wife, mother and human being also. In this direction, Luther Nedeed is the role model for the black community. Naylor has portrayed this inhuman and materialistic approach through the character of fourth Luther Nedeed and how his wife Willa Prescott Nedeed becomes a prey to this materialistic approach of her husband and she undergoes through identity crisis that makes her to seek herself through the remnants of other Nedeed Women. This self-realization is clearly stated by Naylor in a conversation with Toni Morrison:

After she had dug up the remnants of the other Nedeed women, I created a way for her to see her own reflection in a pan of water because she had no self until that moment. And when she realized that she had a face, then may be she had other things going for her as well, and she could take her destiny in her own hands. (*Southern Review* 587)

The present research paper attempts to explore the question of self identity through the projection of Willa's predicament and how the remnants of the past Nedeed Women assist her in discovering her self-identity in Gloria Naylor's novel *Linden Hills*.

### **Materials and Methods:**

The present research article is based on Gloria Naylor's interview with Toni Morrison published in *Southern Review*. Moreover, it refers to the theoretical perspectives of black feminism. The methods of analysis and interpretation are used to analyze Naylor's statement in the interview regarding Willa's discovery of self and her efforts to establish her individual identity.

### **Discussion:**

Identity plays a crucial role in one's life, especially in the life of African American females and consequently in the writings of African American females. *Cambridge Advanced Learner's dictionary and Thesaurus* defines "Identity" as "who a person is or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others". As it is related to one's personality, it has also a psychological implication. A psychological identity is concerned with self-image, self-esteem and individuality. Being a victim of racial and gender oppression, the female protagonist Willa, of Naylor's novel *Linden Hills* undergoes through the identity crisis as she is deprived of her role as a wife, mother, friend and as a human being making her

ready to discover her self-identity. Like her, other minor characters are also in search of their identity.

*Linden Hills* delineates the fourth Luther Nedeed's endeavour to acknowledge his 'American Dream'. It is the place of a housing development area handed down to Luther since 1820 by the first Luther who bought his freedom by selling his wife and six children and went to the North to found Linden Hills. Such a ruthless compensation is at the core of Linden Hills which is an embodiment of achievement and fulfillment of the Nedeeds' Dream whose basis is American Dream because they expect Linden Hills to be "a beautiful, black wad of spit right in the white eyes of American"(9). Just as 'American Dream' is destined to be shattered being materialistic and no regard for human values as its essence, so the dream of blacks living in Linden Hills too gets devastated leaving behind a loss of identity or roots as these blacks only longing for more and more possession at any cost. It is best illustrated through the belief of Luther, "a magician's supreme art is not in transformation but in making things disappear" (12). This belief symbolizes his less adherence to transformation and more concern for the sense of possession which makes an individual more greedy resulting in his or her spiritual destruction. If society consists of such individuals, it is forced to its destruction. In *Linden Hills* it is better shown through the major as well as minor characters. The fourth Luther is the major male protagonist whereas Maxwell Smyth, Xavier Donnell, Chester Parker and Reverend Michael are minor male characters who try to hide their real black identity in the pursuit of their dream and dominate the life of their other powerless black beings especially black females.

The novel portrays variety of female characters that are classified in three categories. The first category is the Women of First Generation consisting two older women like Grandma Tilson and Roberta Johnson who are rebellious and advices to find self-identity. It is the advice which is meant for the existence of entire black community and paying no attention to the advice of elders foreshadows the destruction of individual's self-identity as well as social identity. The second category consists of the Women of Second Generation including several respectable wives and mothers of middle age who only strive for self-comfort and their own families. Its best exemplification is the character of Mrs. Tilson whose ambition kills her husband and shows disregard for the values of black community. The last category consists of the Women of the Rising Generation who follow the footsteps of second generation; grows in isolation from other black sisters; live for their materialistic dream and rather believe in black males who in turn betray them. For example the character of Roxana Tilson who aims at marrying rich wealthy black man and sticks to Xavier Donnell even though he humiliates her being unwise and foolish for his upward career as G.M. Laurel Dumont is the most developed minor character who prefers a career as a top IBM executive in her pursuit of materialism in spite of her first passion for swimming and music. As soon as

she realizes the hollowness of her dream and lack of emotional attachment in her married life, their marriage fails and she gets frustrated. Moreover, she becomes a prey to a male dominance when Luther reclaims her house that forces her to commit a suicide. Even though she tries to seek the guidance of black sisterhood, she fails to get it directly.

The life of black females is hollow and empty resulting directly or indirectly from misconceptions of their black males regarding their black womanhood. They have become the victim of these misconceptions against which they try to rebel but in isolation from their sisters. Due to lack of direct physical contact between them, they get humiliated by their own black males who use them as a means to produce their heir only resulting in the loss of their social as well as individual identity. It is best exemplified through the life story of Willa Prescott Nedeed- the wife of the fourth Luther Nedeed.

Like her predecessors- other three Nedeed women, Willa's is a story of "progressive depersonalization" (78). We are informed about emotional exploitation of the first three Nedeed women through their remnants in the form of Bible journals, recipe books and photographs. As they have been forcefully imprisoned in the "old morgue" (19) by their husbands, their role as a wife, mother and a human being is denied to them. Besides, their social presence is denied due to their husbands' sound economical status and their own pale colour. Hence, they can't mix freely with other black females and consequently devoid of the knowledge of balanced married life. In this direction, Willa remarks, "It seems so unjust that I am barred from having friends among the white wives because of my husband's colour and among the colored because of his wealth" (120).

These Nedeed Women have a very horrible history signifying destruction of their self-identity except the fourth Nedeed woman namely Willa Prescott Nedeed. First three Nedeed women are owned by their black husbands as an object of commodity and they are pale skinned (octoroon) whereas Willa is dark-skinned and her marriage with Nedeed is her own choice and it is not forced upon her. As these Nedeed Women get married, their prior identity is immediately get lost and they are known as Mrs. Nedeed symbolizes the dominance of their husband over them and how they have to even shade their initials. Subsequently, hardly anyone in the family knows their initials as they are called by their husbands as Mrs. Nedeed. Therefore, "Luther actually had to pause a moment in order to remember his mother's first name, because everyone-including his father- had called her nothing but Mrs. Nedeed. And that's all she had called herself" (18).

The fourth Luther has not followed the tradition of his forefathers to marry a pale-skinned woman as "he knew those wives had been chosen for the color of their spirits, not their faces. They had been brought to Tupelo Drive to fade against the whitewashed boards of the Nedeed home after conceiving and giving over a son to the stamp and will of the father"(18). It indicates the selfish and inhuman attitude of Nedeeds towards their own

women considering their existence only for the sake of producing a black male heir for the Nedeed family. The fourth Luther's wife namely Willa is better than pale i.e. dark-skinned woman and she produces not a black son like his father but a white son that breaks the Nedeed tradition. In this 'whiteness', he "saw the destruction of five generation" (18). Accordingly, the child remains unnamed and discarded by his father for the first five years and Luther strives to investigate causes responsible for such "havoc"(18) into his home. He even does his own medical tests to check if abnormalities are with his reproductive organs, but medical reports proved him healthy. As a result, he rejects to accept the child as his own and suspects the character of Willa as he thinks, "Obviously, he had allowed a whore into his home but he would turn her into a wife" (19). He blames her for showing a feeling of ingratitude towards him by committing such act of treachery that has destroyed the purity of the home or empire that took more than 150 yrs to build. Therefore, in order to purify as well as to take revenge upon Willa, Luther ruthlessly imprisons Willa and his own white son in 'the old morgue in his basement'(19). It shows the false pride of Luther rather than fulfilling his duties as a good husband and father. Actually, the child is his own who has got a white color from his maternal side. It means that the Nedeed woman is given identity only through the eyes of her husband whether she is good or bad. The Nedeeds can't tolerate a threat to their patriarchal character. These Nedeeds have such misconceptions about their own women that can be also illustrated through the saying of the third Luther or the father of the last Luther for whom, "breaking in a wife is like breaking in a good pair of slippers. Once you'd gotten used to them, you'd wear them until they fell apart, rather than go to the trouble of buying a new pair"(67). It is an indicative of how these Nedeeds treat woman as a trivial being having existence and importance due to them only. They consider themselves to be a God. Its example is the thinking of the last Luther: "He must have given her at least six lines of credit in his name, never questioning what she bought or why. And he asked so little of her in return" (68) and "By now she understood that he controlled her food and water and light. Whatever she had been allowed- upstairs or down- was hers not by right, but as a gift" (69).

Willa Prescott Nedeed has a very frightening life story due to the misconceptions of her own husband about black womanhood which makes her to suffer a lot. She has to bear a blot upon her character in spite of her loyalty towards her husband and she is locked in morgue- basement of their home with a meager supply of cereal and water. Due to this ill-treatment of her husband, her six year old son namely Sinclair dies that shatters her much and she becomes physically and mentally weak. It is in her forced imprisonment she confronts the truth about her own predicament through the left over records in the form of Bible journal , recipe record and photograph album of all former Nedeed wives such as Luwana Packerville Nedeed, Evelyn Creton Nedeed and Priscilla McGuire Nedeed respectively. It is a vast storehouse of information for Willa which provides a link with the past that makes Willa



aware of her predicament and to reflect upon causes that are responsible for it and inspires her to search for her lost self. She undergoes a conflict which makes her to examine her life objectively and realizes the dangers of following social norms or expectations without questioning them. The more she learns about these women, the more she realizes about herself.

Through the Bible journal of Luwana Packerville, Willa understands the plan of Nedeeds for the usurpation of a woman as a wife, mother, friend and finally as a human being. After producing the Nedeed heir, Luwana was deprived of her role as a wife and mother. Moreover, she was kept in a confinement which made her insane and she lost a faith in God. She started her life as a slave and ended with the same. She lacks the spirit of rebellion. Through this story of isolation of Luwana, Willa understands how she is also trapped in the plan of Nedeeds.

Willa discovers the life history of the second Nedeed wife, Evelyn Creton Nedeed who feels coldness of her husband towards her due to his sexual weaknesses. Evelyn expresses her feeling of sexual frustration and self-hatred through her obsession with cooking. Later on, she consumes furtive doses of aphrodisiacs to win the love of her husband and starves herself by taking little food. As soon as she fails in it, she commits a suicide on Christmas Eve. Through this pathetic tale of Evelyn, Willa discovers why she also seeks the help of expensive perfumes ; how she is starving now which will result in her death and in a anger , she determines not to die alone but taking her husband with her. When she expresses her feeling of rage by scattering the recipe books all over the room, she becomes calm and quiet which makes her to meditate upon her present plight.

After revealing the story of Priscilla McGuire Nedeed, wife of the third Luther Nedeed through her photo album, Willa is shocked and she worries the same destiny for herself if she will not try to rescue from this predicament. Through the observation of Photo album of Priscilla McGuire Nedeed, Willa realizes how more sophisticated, more artistic , more enthusiastic and having a strong sense of her own identity than her predecessors, Priscilla McGuire Nedeed has to fade her identity in the deeper shadows of her own husband and son. Her self-identity is crushed under the male-dominance and she gradually disappears from her family photograph, "Her face was gone.... Priscilla McGuire Nedeed ended at the neck- and without her features...The entire face, ..., had been removed..."(249). In the last photo, Willa comes across the empty whole with the word "me" (249) which frightens her as she foreshadows the loss of her own identity in the word "me" and she becomes conscious of her own predicament. This fear is reflected through the immediate response of Willa:

Staring at the gaping hole that was once Priscilla McGuire, she reached her hand up and began to touch her own face, her fingers running tentatively across the cheeks and mouth, up the bridge of the nose, and spanning out over

the eyes and forehead...She brought her fingers back again and again with a new shape and form to place in the air before her. (267)

She finds a reflection of Grandma Tilson to her identity, first in her hands, then in a pan of water:

She now closed her eyes and used both hands, trying to form a mirror between her fingers, the darkness and memory. What formed in her mind might be it, but she needed to be sure...very slowly, there was the profile of her nose and lips...No doubt remained- she was there. (267-268)

Here, her finding of a reflection of Grandma Tilson symbolizes her intention to follow the footsteps of the first generation of black womanhood as Grandma Tilson revolted against the exploitation of blacks in the hands of Neddeeds and throughout her life she warned her entire black community against self-betrayal and loss of identity. After going through the identity crisis, as she gives an outlet to her suppressed feelings through crying and she accepts the reality of her life, she determines to rebuild her identity which is appropriately stated by Naylor in a conversation with Naylor, "But when this character who had lived within me now for two years finally discovered her face in that pan of water, she decided that she liked being what she was. She liked being a wife and a mother and she was going upstairs and claim that identity"( *Southern Review* 587).

For the first time she realizes the worth of her first name i.e. 'Willa' which does not have only rhythmical effect but also indicative of her having strong will-power to change her own destiny which is in her own hands and she determines not to be a toy in the hands of her husband and decides to breakdown the Nedeed Reign. She recalls the history of her name before marriage as Willa Prescott. Now, she is 37 years old and she got her last name from her father and grandfather. Even though these people are not alive now who made her, she is alive and she has made herself that. Her marriage to Luther Nedeed is her choice and nobody has forced her to assume that name but she has wanted to be a Nedeed. Then, she broods over the reasons that are responsible for her present dilemma and comes to the conclusion that during six years of their marriage she has successfully performed all her duties as a good wife and a good mother. Being a good wife, not only she has done all her homely duties honestly to avoid overburden upon her husband but also organized his social meetings, listened to him whenever he wants and without complaint accepted their separate bedrooms. Being a good mother, she performed all her motherly duties towards her son. She gave him her attention, her time and taught her to read, to speak and learn difference between right and wrong. Hence, legally, she can claim her identity as a good wife and a good mother. When she thinks objectively without being anyone's wife and mother, she finds out that she herself is responsible for stepping down in this basement as she can't accept the blot upon her

character. After that she feels the beauty and simplicity within her from which she gains strength and she realizes,

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....Willie Prescott Nedeed, had walked down twelve concrete steps....-whenever she was good and ready, she could walk back up. (280)

It is an act of affirmation of her self-identity. On the day of Christmas Eve, she awakes herself in a real sense and decides to start on the rooms upstairs along with her dead son. Her action of rising "from those stained and rancid bedcovers to begin keeping house" (289) symbolizes her determination to rebel against the oppressor i.e. her own husband who swallowed her entire female spirit by putting a stain upon her character and not even bothered to treat his own son inhumanly. It is suggestive that she is going to regain her self-identity which she has lost being a submissive to the traditions that are actually intricate strategies employed by the Nedeeds to usurp the self of other women for the success of their selfish motif and she desires to root out the inhuman and evil Nedeed Empire. Being realized that she is own responsible for the wrong choices she has made, she longs for correcting them on her own and tries to establish her individual identity being an independent woman. Her action of climbing each step with confidence by holding her dead child tightly signifies her strong will-power and her firing female spirit that will not care for the obstacles. Therefore, she does not stop in spite of her way being blocked by her husband and she catches Luther in a strong death grip and the three- Willie, Luther and the child- breathe as one and get burn in the lighted Christmas tree which is an indicative of the destruction of the dream of the last Luther to begin the whole game again and consequently the end of Nedeed Supremacy.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus, by highlighting the life journey of Willie from innocence to self- realization, Naylor has depicted the frightening world of the females living on Linden Hills where they are emotionally exploited by their own males and how this oppression makes them to reflect upon their own sub-ordinate status in their own family and society. Willie seeks the help of her black sisterhood indirectly to get rid of her predicament through the remnants of former Nedeed Women. In this respect, the remnants of former Nedeed Women functions as a redemptive force which assists the central character to regain her former identity as well as give her the insight of 'new womanhood'. By understanding their sadistic life experiences, she becomes conscious about her own present plight. Getting known to their segregation and destruction of self, she fears for her own self, accepts the reality and gets ready to rebel against the wrong notions of Nedeeds regarding womanhood. Despite the fact that she faces her physical death, she is victorious in her expedition by discovering her individual self



being a female, black female and a human being. Moreover, she puts a full-stop to the inhuman game of Nedeeds.

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