Chapter III

Mourning to Deliverance

African - American literature embraces the micro social milieu as well as the superstructure culture. The latter always operated in the background. But both are the expressions of novelist’s vision of the integrated entirety that is man’s economic, psychological and intellectual relations with the group of human community. The goal of African - American novels is to give voice to their social group and community. A colored American and an American as well. As a product of distinctive American situation, he is incomparable and culturally rooted in his community, living in one place which is subjected to a variety of outside influences.

*Linden Hills* is a novel in which, the pursuit of money and power is the central issue. Given the nature of the power in this society, many powerless groups have experienced the ineffectiveness of sharing and nurturing communities as a means to liberation. They therefore, have often idealized another solution in their search for independence. In *Linden Hills*, Naylor analyses the effects of the drive for power, a drive that originally emanates from Nedeed’s desire to elevate colored people’s status in America.

Archetypal approach emphasizes the recurrent universal patterns underlying most literary works combining the insights from anthropology, psychology, history and comparative religion. Mythological criticism explores the artist’s common humanity by tracing how the individual imagination uses myths and symbols common to different cultures and epochs. One key concept in mythological criticism is the archetype, a symbol, character, situation, or image that evokes a deep universal response, which entered literary criticism from Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. According to Jung, all individuals share a collective unconscious, a set of primal memories common to the human race, existing below each person’s conscious mind often deriving from
primordial phenomena such as the sun, moon, fire, night, and blood. Archetypes according to Jung trigger the collective unconscious. Another critic, Northrop Frye, defined archetypes in a more limited way as a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole. Regardless of the definition of archetype they use, mythological critics tend to view literary works in the broader context of works sharing a similar pattern.

Jung’s collective unconscious theory is very much applicable for Gloria’s novel *Linden Hills*. Here in this novel the hero Luther, the male chauvinist, even though he has a very good economic background he blindly follows his ancestors and avenges white women without even discovering the truth. All the minor characters who support Luther try to pretend as if they are well mannered and descent, but the fact is different which we can discover through their lifestyle. The seed sown is drastically cultivated and nurtured can be crystal clear by the portrayal of each character.

Though the colored Americans have freedom to live, and wealth to prosper they fail to enjoy, because of the dependence they have in their unconscious mind. They are unsuccessful to keep up their potential and unknowingly they fall a prey in others hands. They cheat themselves and they fail to be independent because of their inborn anxiety. Naylor’s characters are in search of a distinctiveness of their own, which is brought out of the perception of re-memory. They utilize their past memories and create a new present and future with added insight gained from personal experiences and ancestors.

Naylor depicts an African - American cultural identity that can and must naturally survive both separate from and as part of American society. The African – American, in spite of their struggles and aspirations, fears and hopes search to assert their uniqueness. They fight
against the constricting social, political and economic forces in order to establish their place. They want to accentuate their individuality in a society where they were measured as mean slaves. As Singh, Amritji, Joseph Skerrett, and Robert Hogan observe in *Memory and cultural politics: New Approaches to American Ethnic Literature* (1996) “Since the 1960s, this search for African roots has altered the nature of African – American remembering by focusing on positive ways of constructing a new identity, even out of the painful experiences of the past” (7).

Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills* deals with the colored 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.

The intricately woven structure of *Linden Hills* is further testimony to Naylor’s professional skill in bringing neighborhood microcosm to life in all its vivid details. Its structure is based, Naylor explains, on that of Dante’s *Inferno* and features two young street poets who live in a suburb on a hill. During the week, before Christmas Willie and Lister, the two poets, work their way from the poorer to the richer sections of this hierarchical society doing odd jobs to earn money for Christmas.

As Mel Watkins observes in a review that the novel could read as a tale of lost colored souls trapped in the American dream. *Linden Hills* is described as a perverted Eden and a
cautionary tale about the whole dilemma of the colored middle class in America. It is the outer manifestation of an inner crisis in the evolution of a colored community. In *The Women of Brewster Place* Naylor articulated the dehumanizing influence of a dilapidated environment. *Linden Hills* is unique because the people who live there have grown out of the greed, and they pay attention to the diabolic intellect and they were guarded by the brutal will power of Luther’s successors.

Luther hailed from a clan where men usually married many wives, but if any of them begot a white child they were ill treated to death. Luther marries a colored woman but when she begets a white child, Luther suspects her chastity and imprisons both the mother and child for days and thus sows a seed of vengeance in the mind of Willa that she goes to the extent of creating an artificial fire in which she not only kills herself, but also her suspicious husband. She there by puts a full stop to the male chauvinism of Luther’s clan and thus redeems many more women like her who would enter Luther’s family.

Naylor does not present Willa Prescott Nedeed’s meditation on her dead child, and on the story she discovers in a straight line. Rather, she juxtaposes it with her presentation of other Linden Hills residents who also must erase essential parts of themselves if they are to stay in this jewel neighborhood. Most of these characters are men: the lawyer, Wynston Alcott; the businessmen, Xavier Donnell and Maxwell Smyth; the Rev. Hollis; the historian, Braithwaite; and one woman, Laurel. Each of their lives has been damaged by the pursuit of wealth and power that Nedeed embodies, though some do not even know it. They distort their natural inclinations, introducing death into their lives, even as the Nedeeds, who make their money as funeral parlor directors, have distorted their families in order to create Linden Hills.
Naylor shows us the different currencies in which these characters pay for their ascent to Linden Hills – usually it is their deepest natural pleasures that they give up in order to make it. So Winston Alcott gives up his lover David and marries, for homosexuality is not allowed in Linden Hills. Xaviar Donnell gives up his idea of marrying Roxanne, a colored woman who lives in Linden Hills, because she is so much herself that she might drain him of the energy necessary to reach the top. Maxwell Smyth becomes totally artificial. Everything – his diet, his clothes, the temperature in his house, sexuality – is regulated so as to eliminate any funk.

Marie Hollis, originally sharing her preacher husband’s distaste for up-tight middle-class congregations, goes away from him when he receives the plum post in Linden Hill and begins cultivating other women, which results in her ultimate desertion. Rarely mentioned, Cassandra is made the victim of another spurious marriage with the homosexual Winston Alcott, who betrays himself and his lover David for respectability as an attorney.

The pressures of his fraudulent job, leave Rev. Hollis without the wife he loves and he becomes an alcoholic. Laurel puts everything into becoming a successful businesswoman, forfeiting her relationship with her friends, her love of music and of swimming, even her concern for the grandmother, who brought her up. Her relationship with her husband is described as an ascent up two staircases, that were not strictly parallel and whose steps slanted and could not touch the others. She finally breaks into a million pieces.

Important among Linden Hills folks are Braithwaite, the historian who separates himself from life in order to chronicle the comings and goings of the Nedeeds. His view of historiography is that of indifference and lack of involvement. As a citizen it made him think to be an objective. He believes that he cannot participate in life, if he is to observe it. As a result, he does not get to know history’s cunning passages – the letters, recipes, photographs of the Mrs.
Nedeeds – since only interest and concern could lead him to them. Through this character, Naylor critiques the intellectual version of *Linden Hills*, where official history making and a passion with detachment means that men like Braithwaite are not concerned with human life. Braithwaite does not know and does not wish to know are the very things that cause destruction of Linden Hills.

These characters in *Linden Hills* are well handled by Naylor to bring forth the Jung’s collective unconsciousness of the colored men who, however civilized they may be their barbaric nature of ill treating their own sect due to the deep rooted vengeance towards the white.

In criticizing the solution of money and status as a means to empowerment, Naylor stresses that it too is part of African-American tradition. Luther Nedeed’s plan originated in the 1820s, when slavery was very much alive. By charting the Nedeed generations, Naylor reminds us that a colored upper middle class has existed for some time, and that the drive to liberate the race through the creation of an elite group is not unique to the 1970’s. Also, in representing the original Nedeed plan, Naylor points out the abiding element of this solution, for in choosing those who will be allowed to become the part of this class, Nedeed recognizes that they must deny their history of shared oppression, lest they see structural changes, rather than a duplication of the existing structure, as their goal.

*Linden Hills* was presided by a decade that marked the rise of a more distinctly visible colored middle class than had ever existed before in this country. The period was, as well, a time when the goal of women was often portrayed as making it in the system. Media events, such as Newsweek’s 1987 article on the colored underclass and ABC’s program on the women’s movement, emphasize this orientation. These analysis often omit the rise of the money and power solution amongst powerless groups in the 1970s which has much to do with the character
of African-American and women’s mass movements of the sixties and early seventies, when political goals were difficult to achieve, not because they were not vigorously fought for but because of the system’s successful resistance to meaningful change. In the seventies, the emphasis on material gain that characterized so much of the media’s presentation of these groups’ desires is actually a return to an old stratagem that has never worked. But since very few are aware of history, it is not surprising that the swing from mass political movements to an emphasis on individual gain as a route to empowerment would occur.

It also distinguishes Naylor’s presentation of the colored upper middle class in her analysis of its patriarchal position. All the Nedeed men clearly grasp the fact that the subordination of the female to the male is an essential element in becoming powerful people in America. The first Nedeed buys his wife, a slave and never frees her, and successive Nedeed men suppressed their wives through isolating them. As well, the subordination of female to male is in Naylor’s narrative, interwoven with the Nedeed’s emphasis on a fixed hierarchy as necessary uniqueness of their domain. So what level of life one lives on the hills is a sure indication of one’s status, and absolutely other practices lingered to tradition determine even the Nedeed men’s behavior, as an attempt, through the control of community modes, to eradicate change.

In selecting her essential elements of a developing patriarchy, Naylor has much learned from contemporary African – American women’s literature, for it has provided her with clues about the dangers to which the creation of the colored elite might lead. So Linden Hills is not so much hill as plateau where the powerless are kept powerless through the distortion of words, of naming, that is imposed on them. Naylor emphasizes on language, in this case the language is powerless, and twisting to cover up the truth. And Naylor also uses dates to name her chapters,
as if the mark of time were the determining factor in her narrative. Her dates are not only ironic in that they are the days of giving and of peace, but they also emphasize the Christian and therefore Western orientation of Linden Hills. The chapters are a means by which we discover the tension among Nedeeds.

Naylor’s Luther Nedeed, her ex-slave, becomes financially successful because he violates the rules from his settlement to those colored which refers to a collective history. Linden Hills resident reject colored culture. It is no wonder that Luther Nedeed sees that his ancestors’ plan has failed. As Linden Hills resident have money and status, they are no longer colored. They have lost their identity, the identity which was the source of Linden Hills’s origin. They therefore, cannot create a community, and worse, they hate their controller, Nedeed himself, who has conditioned them to be interested only in individual gain. By placing the pursuit of money and power above all else, the Nedeed fragments the colored community and destroy the goal for which they have sacrificed family, feeling, love, fraternity and pleasure. These are the very qualities that make life worth living and also central to liberation and empowerment.

Ironically, not only Linden Hills and its resident lost their identity, but also they have gained power. Nedeed perceives how his showplace is threatened by the proliferation of Brewster Places, those who have been excluded from money and status. To the larger world, Linden Hills image is affected by Brewster Place’s image, just as the status of the colored upper – middle class today, which is affected by the fact that during the seventies there was a corresponding rise in poor colored, particularly poor colored women. The creation of an elite class has not empowered the race, nor has it resulted in the existence of a group of colored unaffected by racism. The distance between Linden Hills and Brewster Place, then, is not as
great as it might appear to be, and Nedeed is not so much a patriarch as a manager, who must hold to rules that are actually determined by whites.

Interesting about Naylor’s account of *Linden Hills*, as opposed to recent African – American women’s literature, is her presentation of central male characters. In her development of Nedeed’s character, she gives us not only their attempt to develop their patriarchy but their failure as well. That failure is due to their inability to create a community, which Naylor suggests, must be the source of any route African – Americans take to empowerment. A community does not exist if it is firmly controlled; nor can it exist without a shared history or shared values. But Naylor also presents male characters that experience the restrictions of Nedeed’s vision. Willie in *Linden Hills* values the fraternity above money, but significantly Willie is still a viable part of a working class community, Putney Wayne. While her first novel focuses on friendships among women, *Linden Hills* emphasizes the friendship between men, Willie and Lester. In contrast to one another such friendship in contemporary African – American women’s fiction, the friendship between Naylor’s Willie and Lester is not opposed to each other’s values. In so tenderly portraying the relationship of these two, Naylor may be suggesting that genuine friendship between men, who share similar values, as well as friendship between women, is critical to the African – American community’s search for empowerment.

The solution to empower the communities is not solved in her novels. Naylor does not give us much solution as she uses her knowledge of African – American women’s literature to show the complex conditions of powerless groups. Naylor is the first writer to show the complex conditions of powerless groups in African – American women’s literature. She is the first African – American woman writer to have such access to her tradition. And the complexities of her novels indicate how valuable such knowledge can be. In doing so her own colored feminist
reading of her literary tradition so as to dramatize the convoluted hierarchy of class, race and gender distinctions in America today, she has began to create a geographical world in her fiction, as varied and complex as the structure of any society.

*Linden Hills* begins with its history, which is really the history of the Nedeed men, for they are Linden Hills. That history is followed by sections headed not by names but by dates, December nineteenth to the twenty-fourth—in spite of the many residents of Linden Hills which Naylor brings in the course of the novel. It is apparently true that the story line is the meandering of Lester who is unwilling to cooperate with the ideas of Linden Hills resident, and Willie, his street friend from the nearby poor community of Putney Wayne, through the wealthy neighborhood of Linden Hills, as they do odd jobs to make some money for the holidays, which ironically commemorate giving.

Although the characters that live in Linden Hills, at the centre of the story is Luther Nedeed himself, for he has power over the individuals, who live in this settlement. His story includes within it the story of his wife, and the wives of the Nedeed men who precede him. For his story is all of their stories, the present Mrs. Nedeed, the story of all the Mrs. Nedeed who preceded her, except that this Mr. & Mrs. Nedeed will be the last of their kind. Naylor presents, the hidden history and her story that has made Linden Hills possible, at least as it now exists. Hence, the character of distinct personalities is the formal structural element of *Linden Hills*.

The novel begins with the story of Luther Nededs, who locks his wife Willa in the basement merely on the suspicion that his son is not his as he does not look like him. While the son dies in imprisonment in the arms of his mother, helpless Willa sustains herself long enough to discover about past Nedeed wives, who had no happiness in store for them and silently bore their suffering at the hands of their cruel husbands till death. Willa learns a lot about the history
of these socially highly respected Nedeed men. A large number of unsent letters written by these women, or their scribbling on the book-marks kept in the Bible bear testimony to the torture they received in isolation. Almost all the Nedeed women died in exile, or in seclusion unseen and unheard by the neighbors.

Naylor has given many layers of stories to the readers who endeavor to weave together in Linden Hills layers that finally do not hold together. For although the persons focused on in stories within the story overlap, they never connect with one another. Linden Hills does conclude with a scene in which all the residents appear, signaling the end of this place as readers know it. The residents of Linden Hills unilaterally ignore the burning down of the Nedeed house by putting out their lights. Hence, the houses of Linden Hills are critical to the concluding section of that novel precisely because they are the measuring stick of their owners’ wealth and their own unwillingness to interact with one another. Only Lester and Willie, outcasts from Linden Hills, stay anchored hand to hand in those last days of the year.

Naylor 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 banished by their own races for their marriage to a colored man and by the colored, as the Nedeeds were upper middle class colored, thus superior to average colored.

Linden Hills is located in the same city as Brewster Place, in fact visible from the top floors of the tenement, the symbol of economic success for colored, many of whom have sold their souls in their pursuit of wealth and status. At the bottom of the neighborhood is Tupelo Drive – the street on which no one can turn around and the location of the home of Luther Nedeed, is surrounded by a frozen lake. The novel follows the literal descent of poets, Willie and Lester into the neighborhood as they follow the eight curved roads ringing the hill to perform
odd jobs, and learn of the resident’s sin of omission and commission. Naylor’s version of the Seven Deadly sins, include lust, hypocrisy, rejection of one’s heritage, contempt for one’s race, complicity in corruption and at the lowest level in the home of Luther himself, perversion, greed and murder. The sin of Luther Nedeed’s wife, consigning her to hell, is that she gave birth to a light skinned child, and Luther imprisons her and the boy in the basement, leading to the boy’s death and ultimately to the deaths of Luther and his wife in a Christmas Eve fire.

The original Luther Nedeed purchased the huge plot of land which later developed into Linden Hills in 1820 after he had sold his wife and six children into slavery. At the very root of Linden Hills lies this callous disregard for the human factor. Luther opens a funeral parlor, which very soon becomes a flourishing business. Luther’s strange knack for business discovers very early that as long as there are people they would live and die; and his commercial ventures - Linden Hills which offer houses on lease and the funeral parlor benefit from the life and death of people. Luther is the archetypal capitalist, who recognizes the commercial value of life and death as well as dreams. He lures the colored to his showcase community with the bait of economic salvation and chains them in their illusion of freedom.

In *The Archetypes and collective unconscious* (1996) Jung distinguishes between the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious:

> A more or less superficial layer of the unconscious is undoubtedly personal. I call it the personal unconscious. But this personal unconscious rests upon a deeper layer, which does not derive from empirical personal experiences and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn. This deeper layer I call the collective unconscious. (3)

Highlighting the universal nature of the collective unconscious, Jung writes in the same
volume, “I have chosen the term ‘collective’ because this part of the unconscious is not individual, but universal. . . . It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of supra personal nature which is present in every one of us” (3-4).

Luther separates himself from his community by his values, as well as by the moat he built around his house. The Nedeeds succeed because they see the white in American future and they want Linden Hills to be “A wad of Spit - a beautiful, black wad of spit right in the white eye of America” (LH 9). In their hatred, they lose sight of their own values and the result is just as negative for them as their goal was for white America which has become spiritually degenerated in pursuit of materialism while people buy into Linden Hills because they see it as a way of changing America. It becomes clear that throughout the book, Luther feels less concerned with transforming America than he does about trying to possess things. Moreover, because Linden Hills is not about being colored 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.

Luther Nedeed comes from a long line of physically unattractive but authoritative family, but his wife from the dependant family who would be featured in Naylor’s third novel, Mama Day. Willa, whose name is not revealed until late in the novel, is identified merely as Mrs. Luther Nedeed, indicative of her objection. She begins her remedial process following the death of her five year old son. Willa Nedeed has no consoling souls to comfort her but instead must construct comfort from the records of the past. While imprisoned in the basement, Naylor’s variation on the gothic imprisonment in attic convention, Willa Nedeed discovers writings, and other records produced by the three previous wives of the Nedeed men – some of this writing intersperse in the family Bible, some in the guise of recipes and grocery lists: all forming the
historical records of women’s lives. Willa discovers that Luwana Packerville, the first Mrs.
Nedeed, created a document of her inner life, by recording her thoughts in appropriate Biblical
chapters:

Using these ancient records as signposts, the woman had found at least one place
that could offer an anchor of validity to the inner flow of her life. Her
bewilderment over the rules he had given her about housekeeping and his diet
before Leviticus; the sorrows of never knowing her own mother next to the Book
of Ruth; her fears of being a new bride before the Song of Solomon. (118 – 119)

Lonely and desperate, Luwana, the wife of previous Luther writes and answers letters to herself.

Through such actions, women have created a newer testament, enhancing the words of
the Bible. By reviewing the tragic histories of previous Nedeed wives, Willa is stimulated to
rewrite her own to prove that she is alive and in control and to give herself the strength to emerge
from the basement. Jolted into action through her reading and remembering, Willa explores her
face with her hands, and then gazes at herself in a water filled pan, her mirror, the key to identity
and self-knowledge, thereby rediscovering herself:

The gentle drops were falling from her bowed head into the pot because this was
the first time she had known peace. Raising the rim to her lips, she began to drink
the cold, rusty water. So it had all come to this. She would take small sips, very
small sips – and think. Now that she had actually seen and accepted reality, and
reality brought such a healing calm. For whatever it was worth, she could rebuild.

(268)

Naylor makes obvious in the novel that a community can be kept in slavery for ages
without chains and without fear of anyone ever discovering it. The verbal magic of capitalism
with its subtle corruption of human ambitions and desires can enslave the modern mind successfully.

Luther, fights against racism thinking that he is a demi-god, and can rule the life of other inferior African-Americans who depend upon him for their wellbeing. As women come last in the social hierarchy, he sidetracks, neglects and tortures them believing they have no role to play except bearing children. And once she becomes a mother and helps him in giving an heir, her role in this world is finished forever. As a result he tramples them under his strong patriarchal power. Colored woman, for him is a child producing machine.

The life of Willa Nedeed, the wife of Luther Nedeed, is a story full of horrors, which is a direct result of Luther Nedeed’s misconceptions about colored women and life. Like her predecessors, other Nedeed women, Willa’s is a story of “progressive depersonalization” (Catherine 78). Willa Prescott Nedeed is a graduate, self sufficient and an employed person. However, she is conditioned to believe that a woman is incomplete unless she marries. It is out of this social conditioning that she marries Luther Nedeed, and starts losing her own selfhood. Luther Nedeed marries her because she suits his need. As per the tradition, paleness of skin matched the paleness of their spirit. Their tradition is to produce Nedeed Clan.

However, this tradition is broken by the child of Willa and Luther Nedeed. Willa 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 actually a Nedeed, carries the light-skinned genes of his maternal ancestors. Due to this ill-treatment the boy dies. However, Willa survives for quite some days. It is in imprisonment in the basement that she understands her own predicament. Her future is nonetheless different from her predecessors. It is in her forced stay in the basement that
she learns the history of all previous Nedeed women such as Luwana Packerville Nedeed. Evelyn Creton Nedeed and Priscilla McGuine Nedeed.

Imprisonment in the basement forces Willa to confront the truth about her life. The basement provides Willa with the missing information which enables her to understand her predicament. The record, left for her by former Nedeed wives in their journals hidden in the Bible, cookbooks, and the pictures that chronicles their systematic disfranchisement as human beings, reveals how badly she has been tricked by social habituation. As Willa analyses her own relationship with Luther, she becomes aware of the previous choice she had made. Her expectation of marriage and the reality of being married to a man who does not value her humanity are radically different. Only when she is locked in the basement mortuary with her starving child does Willa Prescott Nedeed examines her life and becomes aware of the dangers of conforming to social expectations without questioning them. Naylor leaves no doubt about the consequences of living an unexamined life.

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

Luther told me today that I have no right to my son. He owns the child as he owns me . . . . I thought my sale to him was only a formality. I thought in the name of decency my husband would have destroyed the evidence of my cursed bondage. But he keeps those documents securely locked away. O Blessed Savior, can it be that I have only exchanged one master for another? Can it be that [my] innocent
scribbling I sought only to hide from a husband’s contempt are now the diary of a slave? (LH 117)

Thus from the papers of Luwana Parkerville, Willa learns how dependence on her husband causes Luwana to lose faith in God. Because Luwana’s husband had brought 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 woman as a wife, mother, friend, and finally as a human being.

It is painful to know how Luwana’s child was taken away from her:

The child was weaned last month. He was well past two and could now take solid food without harm. Now Luther has taken him to the solicitor today. . . . He told me to prepare a special supper because, when he returns, he wants to celebrate his son’s manumission. Since the law decrees that a child must follow the condition of its mother, I know he has gone to have the solicitor draw up free papers for the baby. This is the final humiliation . . . . So it is a bitter meal that I must cook to help celebrate the fact that I am now to be owned by my own son. (119)

In addition to this Luther debases Luwana to an unbearable degree. In the beginning, the role of wife is denied when the child is weaned out. The control of father over child is so complete that the son, to please his father, will not take food from his mother’s hand. And as Willa begins to understand more about Luwana Packerville’s sadistic relationship with the first Luther Nedeed, she becomes aware of the replicated pattern in her own marriage.

Never really tolerable to be wives, the Nedeed women have some expectations of being mothers. They are acceptable to bear their one carefully planned child, yet as we know from Luwana packerville’s Bible journal, even motherhood is eventually denied to them. In addition
to this, each Nedeed woman has no women friends, and she does not access to intimate knowledge of how other couples and other women function. They have no way to check or confirm to unbalance their own relationship with their husband. Willa says: “It seems so unjust that I am barred from having friends among the white wives because of my husband’s color and among the colored because of his wealth” (120).

Willa is allowed to perform social functions befitting Luther’s wife, but she has no opportunity to develop women friends, as the community women are afraid of the economic control Luther has over their families. Willa becomes aware of what she has forsaken. She also becomes conscious of what has been stolen from her, namely, herself. As she reads about Luwana Packerville’s alienation, she recalls her former friends whom she has abandoned after her marriage because she has no common interest with them. She gives up her right to think and speak.

Willa sees the threads of her own life woven into the full tapestry of Luwana’s story of loneliness and dispossession; she knows how dangerously she is trapped by Luther Nedeed. Willa’s life is an updated version of Luwana’s life. The difference between the two women occurs in the beginning and not in their end. While Luwana Packerville begins and remains a slave with no legal rights, Willa Nedeed was a college graduate with a job, friends and some control over certain areas of her life. What she cannot control is her reaction to the social conditioning that holds little regard for a single, independent woman.

After Luwana Packerville’s Bible journal, Willa discovers the history of the second Nedeed wife, Evelyn Creton Nedeed. Evelyn operates her world through means of providing food. She understands Nedeed’s sexual inadequacies which explain his coldness towards her. Evelyn’s sexual aggravation and self-hatred are expressed in an obsession with cooking. First she
bakes huge meals in order to win her husband’s attention, if not love. After that she uses small furtive doses of aphrodisiacs and the bulimic 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.

After discovering the sad tale of Evelyn, Willa has come to understand her own position clearly. She too, had put on weight after the marriage, sought help from exclusive perfumes, and is now starving. She believes she will die on Christmas Eve but she has determined to take her husband with her. In the midst of this stage of discovery, she barely manages to stifle the memory of seeing Luther embalming one of his female corpses. Intuitively she begins to recognize Luther’s perverted potency. Like all his ancestors, he too exercises all his power in making his dead women look alive, like satisfied lovers. The ironic parallel between the two processes is all the more grim because of Willa’s response. In rage, she rips up the cookbooks and recipe files, and scatters them over the room. Thus she emerges from apathy and returns to life.

Priscilla McGuine Nedeed, the wife of the third Luther Nedeed, is more complicated, more aware and more artistic than either of her predecessors. She reveals her story through a photo album which traces her deterioration from a laughing, free and newlywed 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 her presence vanishes. In the last photos, she has cut out or blotted out her face and in the empty space 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 consumed this spirited woman’s selfhood until she began removing her face from all the pictures. As Willa begins to look at one of her antecedent in the family photo album, she observes a progression of a woman who literally fades from the picture:

Her face was gone. The photo album trembled in her cold hands as she realized there was no mistaking what she now saw: Priscilla McGuine ended at the neck and without her features, she was only a flattened outline pressed beneath cellophane. . . . The sight of it sickened her as she kept slamming through the album, feeling her empty stomach heave. She had been tricked into this . . . I knew you would come, and I’m so pleased . . . into another twisted life. What other kind of woman would have kept something like this? A healthy mind would have never . . . She came to the last photograph. And scrawled across the empty hole in lilac-colored ink was the word me. (249)

This was another chronicle of a Nedeed wife wasted, destroyed, and gone. First Luwana Packerville, then Evelyn Creton, and then Priscilla McGuine are erased from living. Willa Nedeed fears the same fate for herself if she cannot find a way out of her precarious imprisonment “Willa’s response to this immediate and intimate. Naylor describes it as follows: “Staring at the gaping hole that was once Priscilla McGuine; 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”(267). She finds Grandma Tilson’s reflection to her identity, first in her hands, then in a pail 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 . . . . Rimmed by light, there was the outline of her hair, the
shape of the chin, if she turned her head slowly—very slowly, there was the profile of her nose and lips. It was impossible to determine the shape of her eyes, even from the side, but this was enough. No doubt remained—she was there (267-268).

After going through the album of photographs Willa gradually becomes aware of her own situation. This self consciousness has been appropriately stated by Naylor in *An Interview with Toni Morrison* (1985):

> 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 pail of water because she had no self until that moment. And when she realized that she had a face, then maybe she had other things going for her as well, and she could take her destiny in her own hands. (78)

Naylor states further:

> But when this character who had lived within me now for two years finally discovered her face in that pail 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. And I said, “Oh, Lord, woman, don’t you know what the end of this book has got to be? You’ve gotta tear that whole house down to the ground or my book won’t make any sense. Obviously, she didn’t care… But then again that was her life and decision. So the ball was thrown back into my lap—my job was to figure out a way for this woman to live her life and for me to end that book the way I wanted to. (145)

Willa’s physical search through the boxes stored in the basement reveals the lives of those other ‘faded’ wives. The more she learns about the others, the more she knows about
herself. The final stage of her attaining realization is the rediscovery of her first name and the
realization of what she had become, a good wife and a mother in limited circumstances. But
Willa Prescott Nedeed was alive, and she had made herself whatever she has become. Her
marriage to Luther Nedeed was her choice, and she has taken his name by choice.

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. With all of its
problems, it had given her a measure of security and contentment. And she owed
no damned apologies to anyone for the last six years of her life. She was sitting
there now, filthy, cold, and hungry, because she Willa Prescott Nedeed, had
walked down twelve concrete steps. And since that was the truth – the pure,
irreducible truth – whenever she was good and ready, she could walk back up.

(LH 280)

Her journey back upstairs, however, gets entangled with that 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 clasps Luther in a strong death grip and the three-Willa, Luther,
and the child- burn in the Christmas tree fire.

Willa’s expedition from innocence to self-discovery is a dead end, but she has also
brought to an end the Nedeed dynasty. She has achieved selfhood and poetic justice with a
strength derived from recognizing the accumulated sufferings of the Nedeed women. It is in this
way that a kind of sisterhood has been established over time, between Willa and her dead
predecessors, who haunt in the Nedeed’s house. She is restored briefly to a meaningful life
through her recognition of a common bond with these other women. The power she achieves is
fierce.
From a survey of these stories it should be clear that the men often ill-treat them and that sisterhood is often a reaction against men. Yet the men in *Linden Hills* are dramatized more fully and compassionately than the men in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Two days before Christmas, Luther intends to bring her out of the basement on Christmas day if she has reformed.

Willa comes to the following conclusion:

> She knew she was dying. Sitting back on her heels with the album in her lap, she could feel it happening: the passage of air through lung tissues that disintegrated a little with each breath; heart muscles that pumped and weakened . . . with each surge of blood through the body; blood moving through each loosening vein, each tightening artery, nourishing cells that spilt and divided towards a finite end hidden by her skin. The cold that settled around her and the emptiness within her helped to give the process a clarity that would have been lost if she’d had the freedom of the outside world. (266)

In the very place where Willa Nedeed knows that cold fluids have coursed through the veins, and arteries of the dead, she discovers her own mortality and humanity. The information she discovers is as mentally alarming as the embalming fluids, yet her knowledge has the potential of preserving life as the embalming fluids preserve dead flesh.

The presentation of memories is preserved in *Linden Hills* because Willa Nedeed must rely on dead women from the past to inform her. The chronicles and pictures left by former Nedeed wives inform Willa of her peril, they cannot offer alternative to the isolation and destruction that they have experienced. The dead women, while they provide information about Willa’s peculiar circumstances, provide no access to women, who demonstrate strength or self-determination within marriage. Willa has no one, male or female, with whom to check or
validate her experience. The dead Nedeed wives reveal pitfalls, but they cannot 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.

Having removed Willa from the roles of wife and mother, Naylor has two choices concerning Willa’s fate. Willa can either die, or she can succumb to the overwhelming pressure brought by her husband and suffer the fate of former Nedeed wives. Willa’s characterization is concluded with her physical death by fire, just as her mental health has been destroyed prior to her actual death.

Willa Nedeed develops an understanding about her own self, and thus becomes conscious about her predicament. Thereafter, she develops a colored feminist consciousness. Consciousness means an understanding about what one is and what one could become. Willa expects the life of a good colored woman, but, she fails in getting such a satisfactory life. As a result, she prepares to destroy the very system that is responsible for the denial of her humanity and womanhood. She shatters the very dream of Luther Nedeed to start the whole game again.

Once she understands the very process and intricate strategies the Nedeeds have used to annihilate the self of other women, she examines and evaluates herself. She realizes that she is responsible for her life and that she is imprisoned in the cellar not because of herself. Willa realizes that she has made wrong choices. Luther might have led her to the basement steps, but she develops the will and courage. This knowledge gives her strength and power but she gets exhausted and fall asleep. Later on, on waking up, she accepts who she is and where she has been, and she takes charge of where she is going. Willa is determined that nothing will hinder her from putting her life in order. Hence, she tries to start her life again:
The gentle drops were falling from her bowed head into the pot because this was the first time she had known peace. Raising the rim to her lips, she began to drink the cold, rusty water. So it had all come to this. She would take small sips, very small sips – and think. Now that she had actually seen and accepted reality, and reality brought such a healing calm. For whatever it was worth, she could rebuild.

(268)

From the recital of the women’s stories, it should be clear again that the men often ill-treat the women and that sisterhood is often a reaction against men. Yet the men here are dramatized more fully and sympathetically than the men in Brewster Place. Even the monster Luther Neeed and his forbears reveal the inner conflicts, disillusionment and loneliness. In their desire for power, many of the men betray their race and their ability to love. But there are exceptions. In Willie Mason, the young poet – protagonist has gentleness to women’s suffering that suggests potential communication between the sexes. It is he who first hears and reacts to Willa’s mourning wail wafted up to the top of Linden Hills. He has an idealistic crush on Ruth, he sympathizes with Mrs. Tilson where Lester cannot, he worries about what Winston is doing to Cassandra, he is ashamed of the colored Penthouse centerfold that Maxwell Smyth claims as a sign of racial progress, he is a witness to Laurel’s suicide and is deeply disturbed by it, and he first wonders about Mrs. Neeed and suspects foul play.

He has nightmares about women that he can exorcise and reduce to order only by creating the first line of a poem: “There is a man in a house at the bottom of a hill. And his wife has no man” (277). In juxtaposing his and Willa’s scenes, Naylor suggests an intuitive bond between them. He is the link between the crushed “no-face” of Laurel and the “no – face” of Priscilla in Willa’s thoughts about Evelyn’s cooking, “will he eat it” even their names – Willie
and Willa – seem mysteriously connected. And it is Willie who accidentally unbolts the basement door just when Willa arrives at the top step. And yet for all this, at the moment of crisis Willie cannot act on behalf of Willa. He and Lester let themselves be put out on the porch because they are too stunned by Willa’s appearance, too daunted by the powerful Luther, and too young to take full, responsible action. After failing to rouse the sadistic neighbors to call the fire department, they can at best end their odyssey of initiation by escaping the dead-end street at the bottom of Linden Hills, by climbing Nedeed’s chain-link fence.

For, otherwise death is the end of all these people’s striving in this topsy-turvy world. Upward mobility for these colored bourgeois men and women is ironically a Dantesque descent – an allusion Naylor explains and compares Linden Hills to the cemetery, to a frozen lake, to the mortician, to a dead end. Brewster Place is also a last resort for most of its lower – class residents, but, less complicated by self – betrayals and more easily supported by each other, they continue to nourish their dreams in a community that rests on the solid possibility of love.

Physically and spiritually cut off from others, Willa uses the experience of these other women to heal herself, affirming her choice of being Luther’s wife and taking responsibility for all her actions. In so doing Willa makes a distinction with the three previous Nedeed wives who have sold their souls. Catherine Ward in *Contemporary Literature* (1987) states:

> The three wives are Naylor’s versions of the three arches – traitors whom Satan chews on in Circle Ten. Judas, Brutus and Cassius have betrayed their lords or benefactors; the Nedeed women have betrayed themselves. Each has cooperated with her husband’s denial of her value. (78)

The great historian of Linden Hills who has access to all the secret papers of the Luther family is at a loss to know what is happening in the neighborhood. After one hundred and fifty
years of successful control of the family business the Luther family comes to face a crisis when the current Luther Nedeed discovers that his wife has produced a white child. He locks his wife and child in the basement and the heart-rending wail of the woman floats into the strange and frightening atmosphere of the winter night to the horror of the young poets (Willie and Lister). In fact they seem to be the only people who hear this wail as the child starves to death and the mother goes insane:

Time. You let time take your son, now let it take you. She had only wanted those last few seconds – was that asking so much? She begged them to come back – and they would not come back. She knew the days were gone. So many days ago when she could have taken her body, pressed it across his face and put her baby to sleep. But she waited for the door to open. Surely Luther would unlock the door since the child was sick. He was testing her, that’s all. He wanted to see how long she could endure. So she had feared something more than the dying eyes of her son. She feared releasing him and then hearing the bolt slide back from the door. Hearing the intercom click on and say she could come up now – it was over – only a breath after killing her son. (LH 65 -66)

On Christmas Eve Willie and Lister are engaged by Luther to decorate the Christmas tree in his house. As the mad wife of Luther emerges out of the basement with her son’s dead body in her hands they are asked to leave:

‘Luther’ her voice was cracked and husky as Willie’s hand went toward his tightening throat – ‘Your son is dead.’ Luther spun around to the kitchen door. As the woman crossed the threshold, dragging the lace between her legs, Willie wanted to scream. It wasn’t terror or shock; he just needed desperately to open his
suffocating windpipes and scream so he could breathe again. Reality is based solely on the senses. And he could feel the tissues in his mouth and nasal passages drying up from a lack of air, depriving him of taste and smell while, in that split second, he was also being forced to surrender faith in his eyes. And when Luther turned back to them, face muscles immobile, voice incredible even, ‘Gentlemen, thank you for your help. Your checks will be in the mail,’ he lost total faith in his ears as well. (299)

Within moments they discover Luther’s house on fire and the whole community watches the scene silently as the house is totally engulfed by fire.

In Willa’s case, however, healing is linked with a restoration of identity, a relearning of the language of self. Specifically, she is aided by the language of women in the form of domestic records such as recipes, lists and journal entries. When Willa demolishes Luther Nedeed, her victory becomes her predecessors’ victory as well.

Linden Hills is a secure settlement with a long history. Luther Nedeed has access to people with power. In fact, because of careful planning and sacrifice, his family becomes one of those with power, at least in relation to Linden Hills. The Nedeed men caress, cultivate their dream of an ebony jewel community as if it were a woman they are wooing. Naylor’s use of a V-shaped piece of land suggests the female body even as Nedeed’s house, situated at the entry, suggests the male who wishes to make possession. The land is, for succeeding generations of Nedeed men. They carefully select the families who are allowed to live on it. For their people are to reflect the Nedeeds in a hundred facets and then the Nedeeds could take these splintered mirrors and form a mirage of power to torment a world that dared to think them stupid or worse totally impotent.
But, even the Nedeeds, gods that they are, cannot live forever. It is necessary that they have heirs in order to continue to cultivate their dream. Wives, then, are necessary to their plan, the choice of a wife critical. Naylor gives us the outlines of a rising patriarchy in her description of the way the pursuit of power affects the relations between men and women. In order to serve the dream, the women must be malleable (grateful to be the wife of a Nedeed); they must look like a prize (hence their light skin), but not be demanding beauties. They must bear a son as close in nature as possible to their father, and of course they must submerge their lives in the lives of their husbands.

It is the flaw in their century – old plan, critical to the development and maintenance of Linden Hills that generates the novel for the present Mrs. Nedeed does not give birth to a Nedeed boy, who resembles his paternal ancestors. Nature triumphs over planning, for this son harkens back to his maternal ancestors, as the too – long – submerged blood of the Nedeed women finally manifests itself. Unwilling to believe that this could happen, that his father’s genes could be superseded by his mother’s, Luther Nedeed convinces himself that his wife has been unfaithful for he will not recognize even his own mother’s face in his son’s features.

At the very core of patriarchal myth, as Naylor presents, it is the idea that the son must duplicate the father, and that he must be separated from the mother. In an attempt to restore order in the world he has created, Nedeed imprisons his wife and child in the cellar, causing the death of his mother like son, hence ending the heretofore unbroken line of descent. He also precipitates his wife’s discovery of the Nedeed women who preceded her, the final blow to his kingdom. In refusing to accept a variation in the pattern his father had decreed, Luther Nedeed destroys all that his forbears had set in motion.
But of course it is not only this individual Nedeed who causes the destruction of this artificial world; for years, Linden Hills has been rotting from the inside, as Nature refuses to succumb indefinitely to Luther’s families iron will. The imprisoned Mrs. Nedeed remembers her real name because she discovers the records left by her predecessors, letters, recipes, photographs – as the mothers cry out to be heard, to be reckoned with, to exist. As Willa Prescott Nedeed relives her story so carefully dug out from the Nedeeds official records, one realizes the experiences of the women are a serious threat to the men’s kingdom.

Naylor’s rendition of this story emphasizes one element – that once these women have produced one male, once they have carried out their function for patriarchy, they are isolated from life until they no longer exist. They do, however, leave some record of their presence, their lives, in their own individual feminine forms. Through letters to herself, the first Mrs. Nedeed, the slave Luuwana Packerville, tells us how she is silenced to death; through her recipes, Evelyn Creton demonstrates how she had eaten herself to death; and through the family photograph album, Patricia Maguire graphically displays that she is gradually disappearing. In an act of defiance, in the last photo of the album she scrawls the word ‘me’ in the place where her face should be.

None of these women can fight back effectively, for at first they do not know what is being done to them. When they do begin to discover that they are not wrong – that they are being erased not because they have lost their charm or do not fix the right meals – it is too late. Since she has been systematically isolated from the world, no one questions the absence of the present Mrs. Nedeed, for no one knows her well enough to realize that she has not gone away for the holidays. By emphasizing the Nedeed women’s ignorance of their own story, Naylor shows the
maintenance of patriarchy is necessary for the repression of women’s story and the history is selective to male.

In an interview with Toni Morrison, Naylor remarked in *Southern Review* (1987) about Willa Nedeed “I wanted her to learn from those lessons in history” (572) and that she does. As the name suggests, Willa has enough will power to come out of her detention to face her husband, but before she could talk to him and something is sorted out, he puts the entire house on fire. Later on, a “massive bulk was recovered and carried to the ambulance” (LH 303). *Linden Hills* is a fine specimen of gender – oppression and violence in African - American society.

The women of Naylor are like any other colored women, doubly oppressed both at home and outside. However, they can broadly be divided into two sections, first who succumb to the male oppression and others who gradually gain awareness and can raise their voice against their marginalization. By and large, these women are courageous and self supporting and despite oppressions, they take care of their familiar responsibilities single handedly. Sometimes these women express deep solidarity and support each other in the rise of utter difficulties and share deep sisterhood.

However, colored men are largely depicted as womanizers, exploiters and extremely selfish beings, who express their anger and frustration on their women which could be partially due to their own slave position. Here the struggle is not merely for equality alone but acceptance as human beings as a Black Feminist Barbara Smith argues in *Hull* (1982):

Acknowledge the sexism of Black men does not mean we become ‘man-haters’ or necessarily eliminate them from our lives. What it does mean is that we must struggle for a different basis of interaction with men. (10)
Gloria Naylor has clearly expressed the anger, the rage and disappointment of colored women in her fictional works powerfully and passionately. She explores the complexities and diversities of man-woman relationship, from new dimensions very vividly and sarcastically depicts the female experience of oppression and exploitation in a male dominated colored society.

Most of the Linden Hills residents have sold their African - American identity, indeed their very souls, for the grand illusion of material and professional success. The food these characters eat and the activities and conditions associated with eating draw attention to their cultural and personal starvation. Interestingly enough, those characters that were never a part of Linden Hills, like Willie White Mason and Norman Anderson, are those who mentally and physically depart. Like Lester Tilson, Kiswana Browne and Ruth Anderson are the most psychologically and culturally healthy characters in the novel. They do not have money, cars, houses and all of the other materials but they have dominant culture and strong-minded signs of success.

Willie Mason and Lister Tilson, the dropouts, have chosen a life of poverty and poetry. As they come down the circular avenues of the urban hell they have rare insights into the multifarious minds of its inhabitants. Willie, who is an optimistic young African – American poet lives in a slum bordering, the exclusive colored neighborhood of Linden Hills. He survives by working odd jobs. He left school after completing the ninth grade, believing that he needed to live among the people in order to write and he takes pride in memorizing, the reciting poetry. He is widely read but rather immature, and he questions whether he has chosen the right path in life. He joins his friend Lester to work in Linden Hills for Christmas money and discovers the terrible
price that the people must pay to live there. Willie determines that he will never become part of its soulless society:

“Then I guess it’s just a coincidence” – Willie felt his heart pounding – “that the majority of black folks in this country are poor, have been poor, and will be poor for a long time to come.”

“Well, I see that you can conjugate verbs.” Maxwell brushed an invisible speck off his jacket sleeve. “And a difficult verb at that. . . . black people are still nothing is because they keep their eyes turned backward toward the times when they could be little else, and are still crying about what they could never do while what they can do is swiftly passing them by. And so, in that case, you’re absolutely right – that type will always be nothing.” (LH 113 – 114)

Lester Tilson is also a poet of twenty years old and lives with his mother and sister in the first house of Linden Hills, a house of discord. He ridicules the materialism of Linden Hills, yet he accepts its comforts. He serves as Willie’s cynical guide and companion as they work their way street by street to the bottom of the Hills and the home of Luther Nedeed “Maybe so” (153).

Lester shrugged his shoulders “Hey, maybe he’s got her roped to his bed for safekeeping. Now, let’s face it. If you were as ugly as Nedeed, wouldn’t you have to chain a woman to your mattress in order to get a little action? So give the poor guy a break” (153).

Willie and Lester’s visit to the Anderson apartment is a good example of the cultural health in the have-nots’ lives. Norman invites Willie and Lester to his Ruth’s apartment because it is cold outside; he says simply and sincerely: “Look, Why don’t you join monkeys come up to the house and have a little something hot?” (32).
Norman offers real hospitality even though he is dirt poor “The Anderson poverty was a standing joke on Wayne Avenue. People said that if Norman brought home air, Ruth would make gravy, pour it over it, and tell him not to bring home so much the next time” (32). Furthermore, the Anderson apartment is threadbare, for every sixteen months Norman went:

. . . screaming and tearing at his face and hair with his fingernails, trying to scrape off the pinks. He resorted to his teeth and bare nails only after everything else had failed – jagged sections of plates and glasses, wire hangers, curtain rods, splinters of wood once part of a dresser, coffee table or her grandmother’s antique music box. (34)

Eventually Ruth does not replace the furniture which Norman destroyed and she removes glasses and silverware from the apartment, so that finally the Anderson only have three Styrofoam cups – cups that cannot be broken or used to scrape off the pinks – and an almost bare apartment.

Although the Andersons do not have material possessions, the decaying garden-apartment is one in which:

Visitors found themselves thinking what a nice feeling to be allowed into a home. And it was a home with its bare wood floors, dusted and polished and with three pieces of furniture that sat in three large rooms: one sofa in the living room, one kitchenette set with plastic bottomed chairs on uncertain chrome legs, one bed. (33)

Norman and Ruth are authentic hosts, the kind who make guests feel welcome:

Ruth put three Styrofoam cups on the table, setting the ones in front of Lester and Willie as carefully as she would china. And she gave them each a plastic spoon with a paper napkin folded underneath. Norman poured the coffee and made such
a ceremony of unwrapping Willie’s cheap blackberry brandy and adding it to their cups, you might have thought it a rare cognac” (33).

Into such a scene is projected talking a good – natured laughter, a sense of community.

Ruth Anderson is the only one among the young women who has anything close to a successful relationship with a man. And since she and Norman are everything for each other, the issue of colored sisterhood seems to have less relevance. Her dreams of stability have been shattered by Norman’s insane attacks by an imaginary pink slime in every two years. But the two have affirmed their love for each other even in the depths of their worst suffering, and they are committed to each other.

Norman who has periodic attacks of insanity has a loving wife. The reverend Michael Hollis who gives a rousing sermon to an indifferent congregation is really an alcoholic. The successful lawyer whose marriage is celebrated with great fanfare is a homosexual:

The fourth cup of eggnog started toward his mouth and he paused. This stuff was too sweet and all that sugar wasn’t going to do anything but upset his stomach. He poured half of it into the sink and diluted the rest with Scotch. The heat moved from his middle, spreading out to his limbs, the tips of his fingers and making a full circuit back to the lining of his tongue. And for me, that utterance may be given unto me that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel. . . Draining the cup, he went to the closet for his cashmere overcoat, searching the pockets for his mints and tinted glasses before opening the front door on the chill December morning.

For which I am an ambassador in chains. (165 – 166)

Willie, Lester, Ruth and Norman provide the initial commentary on the Linden Hills
residents. Ruth says, for example, that she lives in Linden Hills, but she never wanted to live there again: “I’ve had that life, Norm, and I lasted six months. Those folks just aren’t real – excuse me, Lester. I’m not trying to talk about your mother” (39). Lester says that the Linden Hills residents “. . . are a bunch of the saddest niggers you’ll ever wanna meet. They eat, sleep and breath for one thing - making it” (39). Lester Tilson, though he lives in Linden Hills – just barely since his family’s home is at the top has taken advantage of the insights which his grandmother, Mamie Tilson, gave to him. She was the only one of her generation of Linden Hills residents, to stand up, to a Luther Nedeed. She had told Luther Nedeed:

‘I used to fish with your daddy down in that there pond, Luther, and he gave me this land and I ain’t giving it up. So take your frog – eyed self and your frog – eyed son out of here. And I know your evil ways – all of you. So if you plan to try something like burning my house down while I just happen to be in it, I got this here deed and my will registered at the counter house. Your daddy weren’t no fool and he didn’t fish with fools either.’ (12)

Lester remembers his grandmother’s legacy and tells Willie, Ruth and Norman that “God, Grandma Tilson would piss in the grave to hear that one. She hated those Neeeds” (40).

Later the same day, Willie’s visit to Lester’s home is a major contrast to the genuine warmth and community, which he had experienced at the Anderson’s home. Lester invites Willie to spend the night so that the two young men can have an early start on seeking odd jobs in Linden Hills. Ruth gives them the tip about the possibility of jobs. Lester does not, apparently follow social protocol in forewarning his mother that Willie would be having dinner and spending the night. Mrs. Tilson first condescended and her hypocritical statement is “Well, I guess we can always find more, and especially for such a good friend of Lester’s”. Willie and
Lester both know that she has never approved of Willie as a friend for her son, “Willie always felt big and awkward and black around this delicate, yellow woman” (48).

Mrs. Tilson, is able to mutter, “‘Look, I know you didn’t plan on me being here.’ Willie had difficulty finding something to do with his hands. It’s sort of short notice and I’m not very hungry anyway” (48). Mrs. Tilson, trying to recover and re-instate her social graces says, “‘Nonsense.’ Mrs. Tilson patted his hand lightly and rapidly. There’s always something for company. But we’re eating like peasants tonight – just fried chicken” (48).

Rather than the relaxed and unassuming sense of community which Willie had experienced in the Anderson home, here he finds ‘serialized’ smiles, updates on the cost of reupholstering furniture, the obligatory coasters, and a general sense of discomfiture. The dinner itself reveals what Mr. Tilson and Roxanne, Lester’s sister, have given up to live among the privileged: naturalness. After making sure that her dining table is set with the starched linen napkins, the China, the silverware, and the fragile Norwegian crystal, only then is Mrs. Tilson concerned with how Willie might be perceiving the argument that erupts during dinner between Roxanne and Lester: “‘Lester, Roxanne, please, not in front of company.’ . . . ‘Now Willi’s going to think we’re a group of barbarians in this house’” (55). Roxanne on the other hand, is so bent on defending her upwardly mobile boyfriend, Xavier Donnel and filling the conversation “. . . with the importance of her new promotion,” that she only eats “. . . two bites of chicken and teaspoon of potatoes. . .” (54). That Roxanne only nibbles at the peasant; common food rather than getting down signals her cultural starvation and deprivation.

In fact, there are a variety of women in the novel; they 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 the rising generation. Grandma Tilson
is one of the stern protectors of traditional values; however, she is no more alive. She had fought Luther Nedeed as the long-fighter against his upward-striving colored community and she had provided the catfish heads that Luther Nedeed used to make the female corpse seem alive, as if passing on some principle of female vitality. Her warning against self-betrayal and loss of identity, so often neglected by the middle-class residents, is meant for all women and men. The other older woman is Roberta Johnson, Laurel Dumont’s grandmother, who gives advice about finding one’s own identity.

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. Mrs. Tilson, Lester’s mother, is one the most fully characterized woman of this kind. According to Lester, her ambition killed his father as she forced him to have two jobs. Moreover, she has betrayed the values of colored integrity by wanting an easier life for Lester in his struggle for dignity and power. Lycentia Parker, now dead, apparently took a more destructive stance in heading a petition drive to keep poor colored out of Linden Hills, and her feelings are shared by the women in her wake, including Xavier Donnell’s aunt. All of them are concerned with material wealth and status, with appearances but derived little human sustenance from each other.

The young women also tend to fare badly and remain detached from each other. Roxanne Tilson, for example, at twenty-seven wants to marry rich and colored, and yet she clings to Xavier Donnell at the price of some acute humiliation. Though Xavier loves her, he is fearful of the commitment and anxious because the upward career as a G. M. Manager makes marriage to Roxanne unwise and foolish.
On December twenty-fourth, the final day of the book, Nedeed insists on carrying out the family tradition of decorating the tree. He pays those Linden Hills handymen, Lester and Willie, to help him, for his family is supposedly away. By refusing to vary tradition one iota, Nedeed continues to affect his own downfall. He must have the domestic ornaments his family has always used. The closet door is left open so that Willa Nedeed Prescott can ascend, her dead child in hand, the net and veil of her predecessors encircling her, to make her own order. The final struggle between Luther and Willa will unite them and their child in a circle of fire:

The moment his fingers touched the wrapped body, making a fraction of space between it and Willa her arms loosened for one to shoot around his neck, the other his waist, and the three were welded together. Luther tried to wrench free, but they breathed as one, moved as one and one body lurched against the fireplace. The trailing veil brushed an ember, the material curling and shrinking as orange sparks raced up its fine weave. There was no place in her universe to make sense out of the words, “My God, we’re on fire.” (300)

Nedeed is not only destroyed by the suppression of his mothers, he is destroyed as well by the Linden Hills residents whom he presumed to create. In an act that exposes their hatred for him as their controller as well as the disinvolvemnt he has always demanded of them, his neighbors let him and his house burns down. Only Willie from Putney Wayne is willing to try to save the Nedeeds, who after all are only flesh and blood to him. Finally, as if emphasizing her order, Nature immediately reclaims the Nedeed house. The lake, which served as the barrier between the Nedeeds and the world, pulls the century old house into itself in one single stroke. The Nedeed tradition is extinguished forever.
Willie, the local poet from Putney Wayne and Lester, a descendent of Grammy Tilson, the only one who did not bend to the first Luther Nedeed’s will, are the witnesses to this story of *Linden Hills*. Naylor may be signaling, through Willie’s importance in the novel as well as through the story of Wayne Avenue residents Ruth and Norm, that Putney Wayne, a working class neighborhood may be the setting of her next novel. If it is, these Putney Wayne characters have learned much about the folly of trying to be a god. So they have learned that those who place wealth above human beings cannot create a community that endures.

Maxwell Smyth, Laurel Dumount, Winston Alcott, Xavier Donell, Chester Parker, and his wife Lycentia, Reverend Michael T.Hollis, Professor Daniel Braithwaite live in Linden Hills and everybody is after his own piece of American dream. Their ideal is Luther Nedeed and his values are their values and his life style is their own life style. Thus, all of them are locked in their wrong choices. One of the residents, Maxwell Smyth, is the highest ranking black executive at General Motors. In order to make his blackness disappear, he adopts tricks like spelling his name ‘Smyth’, getting straight ‘A’s, never appearing to sweat or get cold, avoiding sex and adopting a special diet and routine that allows him to control even his bowel habits so that they become a five minute ritual”. Smyth is in ‘a race against the natural’, and he is ‘winning.

Another resident, Laurel Dumout, has already achieved professional goals that Smyth envies. Laurel’s name suggests her status. She has been a winner all her life. To attain the present level, she has to cultivate her natural and physical talents though she starved emotionally. Laurel’s mother died when she was quite young. When her father remarries, Laurel feels alienated from her step-mother. Consequently, the girl began spending summers in rural Georgia with her grandmother, Roberta Johnson. As she grows, she graduates Phi Beta Kappa from
Berkerley, and works her way into a top executive position at IBM and marries a man believed to become the next State Attorney.

However, she remains emotionally far removed from her husband and even from her deepest sense of herself. In fact, she destroys her essential spirit in order to be successful and free:

All before her twenty–fifth birthday and in all of them she had been smiling. No wonder the world pronounced her happy, and like a fool she had believed them. Perhaps, just once, if she had failed a course, missed a plane connection, or glittered less at Howard’s parties, she might have had time to think about who she was and what she really wanted, but it never happened. And when she finally took a good look around, she found herself imprisoned within a chain of photographs and a life that had no point. She had kept driving because memory told her that there was a point at the clearing of those pine trees. And wedged into it was a house, an old woman, and a beginning (228).

When her husband decides to divorce her, she faces not just the emptiness of her life. In the end, a confrontation with Luther Nedeed makes her realize that there is no inner core to her person but only a frightening void. As a result, she kills herself by diving off the high board into an empty pool. Her mutilated and faceless body symbolizes her spiritual condition:

Choosing an area where it as still totally blue, she began to talk herself through the part that never came naturally. Legs straight, body forward, toes thrust. She sprang. Chin close to her chest, that familiar grip of terror in her stomach – anything could go wrong up in the air. But once she got down, there would be nothing to fear. Once she got down, she’d be free. (248)
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 in responding directly and openly to her grandmother, she tries to call Mrs. Nedeed, who has been locked in the “cellar morgue” by her husband. She does reach Ruth Anderson and talks with her for hours about old times. 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.

Winston Alcott, a homosexual resident of Linden Hills, lives at the second Crescent Drive. He ends his eight year old relationship with his lover David just to bear the rumor and to continue his legal career which was under a cloud “Winston’s smile was almost cruel. ‘You can’t walk into Sinai Baptist next week and marry me’. . . ‘Right.’ He nodded his head slowly. ‘You got me there. And since I can’t be your wife, I won’t be your whore’” (80). He marries and as a reward for entering a doomed marriage, Luther Nedeed grants him a lease on the exclusive Tupelo drive area.

Another resident of Linden Hills is Xavier Donnell, who is in love with Roxanne Tilson. But it is doubtful whether she would turn out to be a right choice as a wife. Xavier is also as ambitious as Maxwell Smyth, although, he has not learned Maxwell’s entire trick for hiding his blackness. When Xavier asks Maxwell’s opinion about marrying Roxanne, Maxwell advises against it by stating that Roxanne’s family “. . . has one foot in the ghetto and the other on a watermelon rind” (116).
Chester Parker, husband of the dead Lycentia, is a greedy colored middle class man who is also a resident of Linden Hills. However, when he is seen mourning for his wife, he is also seen preparing himself and his house for his next wife. Reverend Michael T. Hollis is a person who also puts up at fifth Crescent Drive. Hollis is a lesser version of Nedeed and both, Nedeed and Hollis quarrel at Lycentia’s funeral. Hollis is angry because he thinks that Nedeed is infringing on his territory by assuming an official role at the service. As the president of the Tupelo Drive Reality Company, Nedeed delivers a speech or piece of writing that praises the tenant who dies. Though Hollis is a man who represents the church, he has spent years together in pursuing sensual pleasures and material possessions. As a result he has an endless supply of women, closets full of expensive suits, and a couple of LTDs. He is portrayed as an emotional zero.

Professor Daniel Braithwaite is a historian whose education was supported by Nedeed. After receiving his Ph.D., he moves to Linden Hills and settles down in a home given to him by Nedeed. He has lived there for thirty years. With his intimate knowledge of Linden Hills, and with his full access to the records of the Tupelo Drive Reality Company, he has written a twelve volume history of the area. His goal is to win the Nobel Prize. However, since the death of his wife, Laurel Dumont, his house is transformed into a tomb. It is closed up. The only thing that he works on is to record the decay around him. He has no intention of stopping the corruption that he observes, but thinks only of using it as a means of winning honor. All these characters live a stale and sterile life as they are guided by the philosophy of Nedeed.

_Linden Hills_ centers round the theme of colored men’s oppression of colored 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 not important; they are owned, bred and forgotten. An economically astute man, Nedeed never saw women as human beings.

*Linden Hills* can be read both at the realistic and allegorical levels. Naylor fuses realistic portrayal with an allegorical pattern that has the moral rigor of an activist – writer. As an allegory, the novel brings out the parallels between the plight of the African - American community and that of the colonized societies of Asia and Africa. The metaphor of hell in the novel has to be seen in this context. The colonization of the African - American community by the white majority is mental and material, cultural and economic. By succumbing to the white models of success, styles of living, art and beauty, the African - American stands to lose his individuality and sense of identity. But, given the complex nature of social organization in American society where the modes and means of production are fully owned by the whites, the question of cultural identity cannot be treated in isolation from the larger question of economic independence.

*Linden Hills* highlights the aggression which is internalized by this system of suppression. The destructive fire at the end of the novel underlines the fact that it is not possible to redefine the African - American identity without the violent confrontation with those very forces which have institutionalized slavery in modern times through a subtle use of the mesmerizing potential of modern media. This disagreement is suggested in the very structure of the novel by the mysterious passages written in a different style. These are the reflections of a distraught woman, who in her captivity reads the reminiscences of women who have had tragic lives. The fiery climax finally explains the source of this agonizing narrative.

Archetypal approach is observed in Naylor’s invention of characters in *Linden Hills*. All individuals share a collective unconscious, a set of primal memories common to the human race,
existing below each person’s conscious mind often deriving from primordial phenomena such as the sun, moon, fire, night, and blood. Through this application reader can assimilate all the characters with their deep rooted environment of ancestors. Even though they try to decorate with modernity they fail due to this effect. Moreover, all the characters have been vividly described through the eyes of little poets. Naylor beautifully organizes the class division, their beliefs and struggles to suppress their feeling. The outburst of their identity is very well portrayed through the simple actions. So it is obviously true that everyone follows the inclination of ancestors in our unconscious mind.

Naylor is emphatic that the challenge to the system can come only from those sections which have suffered extremes of deprivation and dispossession. Naylor’s narrative is the vigor and resonance of her language. Much of the affirmation she communicates comes from the optimism of her style. This, to some extent negates the vision of the colored hell that is the suffering and rebirth of women in the novel she portrays. In Linden Hills she puts Dante’s Inferno to fictional use by the sheer force of her verbal artifact. Dante’s hell, at one level, suggests the deepening possibilities of evil within the soul. But Naylor’s hell exposes the corrupt foundations of the social structure which sets illusory goals for the colored community. For Dante, the sinners who remain fixed for ever in the evil which they have obstinately chosen are images of perverse choice.

Naylor depicts the victims of the capitalist dreams condemned to become prisoners of their ill–defined ambitions. As in Dante, so in Naylor, a distinction has to be made between hell as a religious concept and the vision of hell which is an artistic production, representative of certain self knowledge. In the portrait of Linden Hills and its inhabitants, Naylor offers a vision of hell as it is reflected in the present pursuits of the colored community.
Like Kiswana, who is the transitional character between *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*, Willie may be the transitional figure between *Linden Hills* and Naylor’s *Mama Day*. Willie is interested in and knowledgeable about the history and literature of African–Americans. But he is also educated in one respect that she is not. He comes from a living working class African–American community with a deep cultural past that is as old as Linden Hills. Through his friendship with Lester, he learns about Linden Hills from the inside and thus knows that the solution for the creation of an elite class fragments and destroys community. As a person intensely involved in the direction of his folk’s future, he is not as likely to repeat, as some upwardly mobile working class men have done, Neeed’s error.

After depicting to show that a revolution in consciousness can save the colored community from imminent disaster, Gloria Naylor’s third novel, *Mama Day*, yields strong female characters, accumulate significant generational connections between women and offers a revelatory look and uncertainty associated with the female experience in the Southern culture. Wagner-Martin (1988) in *Contemporary Literature* has identified *Mama Day* as a novel about the way one generation of women affects another and the way the strong heritage of gentleness and anger, courage and frailty, which can shape individual consciousness through several generations of family. In this regard *Mama Day* portrays about the strong women at the center and helps the reader to define the southern colored experience largely through their relationship with each other and their guardianship of culture.